

**‘NIGGER’: INTERPRETATIONS OF THE WORD’S PREVALENCE ON THE
CHAPPELLE’S SHOW, THROUGHOUT ENTERTAINMENT, AND IN EVERYDAY
LIFE**

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ABSTRACT

‘Nigger’: Interpretations of the Word’s Prevalence on the *Chappelle’s Show*, Throughout Entertainment, and in Everyday Life
(Under the direction of Anne Johnston)

This study analyzes the prevalence of the word *nigger* in the television sketch comedy the *Chappelle’s Show* – in particular, the word’s prevalence in a 2004 skit entitled “The Nigger Family” – by performing a textual reading of the five-act skit, along with conducting in-depth interviews with ten black individuals. In addition to the comprehension of sentiments regarding the word’s prevalence on the *Chappelle’s Show*, this study also analyzes how participants construct meaning out of the word as it is prevalent not only throughout entertainment in general, but in everyday life outside of entertainment as well. The data from the in-depth interviews is gathered and analyzed by the utilization of the grounded theory framework of Strauss and Corbin (1998).

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encouragement and love in all that I did. I cannot possibly thank them enough for being there for me during these times, as well as being there for me all throughout my life. I know there is no way that I could have possibly accomplished as much as I have in my life if it were not for them.

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Lastly, I want to acknowledge the genius of Dave Chappelle, for creating what I and many others believe is one of the most important pieces of American popular culture/entertainment not only in recent memory, but – perhaps as time goes on – in history as well. Getting someone to laugh and critically think at the same time is not exactly an effortless task, and it can seem even more daunting when it comes from the environment of black popular culture, where the line between brilliance and racial buffoonery is often times unmercifully fine.

It is a skill that Chappelle proved to be quite adept at with this show, perhaps reflecting the uncompromising nature of the man himself, and who given the choice between maintaining his humorous artistic vision for the purposes of social enlightenment and that of profitability at the expense of dignity, bravely (and maybe wisely) chose the former. Making such a choice is never as easy as we would like to think, and often times we cannot completely blame one for going where the security (i.e. – the money) lies. However, when an artist like Chappelle crafts something as humorous and thoughtful as the *Chappelle's Show*, doggedly carrying out such a great vision while refusing temptations to compromise either their own selves or their message, they must be admired and respected. Here is hoping that we have not seen the last of such artistic-social visions among modern artists, especially among new generations of black artists, no matter their specialty.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memories of Dr. Robert Stevenson, a great scholar and a caring person who helped to make my experience at UNC-Chapel Hill an enriching one, and to my aunt, Oralene Sutton-Reed, whom I hope is smiling upon me for having accomplished my educational goals. For all of my loved ones, friends, and very special people that have made the transition from this world, I salute you.

PREFACE

As an African-American, I am very much aware of the American entertainment industry's longstanding and disconcerting track record regarding minorities – from its on-screen portrayals of minority characters and demographics to the real-life dearth of professional opportunities offered to aspiring minority artists and professionals within various levels of the entertainment system, opportunities that could help provide a more balanced (and perhaps a more respectable and dignified) view of non-white identity to audiences. Concerning this study, this is especially true regarding those of African descent. This undeniably shameful social/business ideology of the industry regarding black culture – which is communicated and marketed to the public both on-screen and off – and the subsequent feelings of discomfort and resentment that their racially motivated modus operandi has engendered among many black media consumers are also no different for me.

In general, I do not profess to be in constant possession of objectivity or neutrality when a discussion of race comes up in conversation – let alone in a discussion concerning race in entertainment – in spite of the willingness to explore all sides of the debates. In this regard, sensitivity is admitted on this issue. With an interest in discovering how some black media consumers interpret the term *nigger* as it used inside and outside of popular entertainment, the development of this project was intellectually important for me in two particular ways.

The first objective was to understand the processes behind these interpretations – specifically, how these (potentially diverse) interpretations are formulated, and what these interpretations represent when considering the black participants as a collective whole, potentially providing insight as to how other black media consumers might rationalize the ways and means in which they interpret the word as well. Given the debate over the word *nigger* in recent memory, (particularly, notions about the word’s linguistic malleability as it is adopted by others as a non-racist term of endearment, both inside and outside of popular culture/entertainment) it was of real importance to understand how black individuals interpret this word in their own honest observations; for it was not just enough for me to solely rely on the observations of scholars and social critics as to how *they think* others understand the word.

The black participants of this study – just like many other blacks – may not be accorded a public forum by publishers and media organizations through which they can speak their minds to the issue. That is not to say that what these black non-public figures have to share is any less important than those observations from tenured academics and other members of the American intelligentsia, nor is it to say that such non-public figures somehow lack the critical capacities to offer profound insight on the debate. As such, I was (and still am) just as fascinated to discover what, for instance, a 26-year old employee in the food-service industry might have to say as I would be in hearing the observations of persons such as Cornel West, Michael Dyson, or Stanley Crouch, to name only just a prominent few.

The second way in which this project is important to me comes from an admittedly self-centered point of view, though I do not mean that to imply any conceit. Like many blacks in general within this debate and like the participants of this study in particular, I am

in no small possession of certain views regarding the prevalence of this word both inside and outside of popular culture/entertainment, and it was especially intriguing to discover to what extent some of the participant observations either coalesce with or contract from those of my own.

As I have carried out this study, I know that I have done so under the distinction of being an academic, which might classify me (in the eyes of some) as being somehow more credible in offering an opinion to this issue, as opposed to anything that non-academics might have to say. This is possibly due in part to the world of academia (the world that I belonged to during the time of this study) being viewed by some as a particular community epitomizing social objectivity. By virtue of supposedly having this objectivity, my critical judgments for evaluating an issue such as this would most likely be seen as being “better than average.”

The power of this word (i.e. – what this word can conjure up among various blacks interpreting it in their own individual ways) to significantly affect the emotions of those blacks hearing it – regardless of whether it is directed at them or not, and no matter what their class/distinction may be – could really go without much questioning. In this regard, I may be no different than some of the participants of this study. Hence, my resultant interest in uncovering the extent to which my views and those of the participants might be similar or dissimilar on this issue, given that we all are (regardless of profession or status) black individuals who are in no short supply of opinions regarding both race and what it means to be a person of color in America (and the world). While my voice is presented in the textual analysis of the “The Nigger Family,” the objective of the in-depth interviews was to provide interpretations of the skit from participant sentiments. To these ends, the presentation of this

study's critical readings and interviewee interpretations attempt to maintain such analytical distinctions.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

No matter whether the talk is coming from academics, politicians, entertainers, or the general public, it seems as though much debate has been occurring in regards to the commonplace use of the word *nigger* among individuals and groups, with a particular emphasis on how the term has become a popular utterance among various black persons. While such usage of this well-known racial epithet might well be regarded as undeniably disrespectful to persons of African descent, contrary sentiments would hold that such an utterance of the term is not so much the rehashing of a negative word, but rather the deconstruction of the term's historically perceived connotation, whereby it is reconstructed as a term signifying endearment, particularly among black persons.

Some of the most well known examples of this reconstructed use of *nigger* can be found within the world of popular culture/entertainment, where black artists have explored the imagery and emotions that this word conveys within the context of their craft. Although this linguistic appropriation of the term tends to be commonly associated with the lyrics of many rap music songs, it has also extended into other genres such as literature, rock and roll music, and comedy.

One of the more recent examples of this use of the word was found in a 2004 television skit of Comedy Central's popular *Chappelle's Show*, whose creator is black comedian Dave Chappelle. In a skit entitled "The Nigger Family," a white family, modeled

after classic 1950's television clans of such sitcoms as *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver*, is routinely referred to by neighbors and others by their last name only – “Niggar,” a phonetically accurate but slightly altered spelling of *nigger*. The premise of the skit is that while others outside of the family – including the television audience – might clearly be aware of the irony of the family's last name, the “Niggars” themselves seem to be hopelessly ignorant of the similarity.

The racial overtones of the family's name and their complete obliviousness to the linguistic similarities between it and the infamous epithet could on one hand represent a method of artistic commentary – which in this particular instance could be described as a “strategy of subversion through overuse” (Kennedy, 2002, p. 38), whereby the injurious nature of the term is gradually stripped away for the purposes of engaging in social analysis and critique. Such a method could be said to have been employed by Chappelle in his creation of “The Niggar Family,” given that on this particular episode before the segment aired, he announced to his studio audience that the skit's purpose was to discover whether or not the term could be equally offensive to viewers if it was incessantly directed at whites – in effect, engaging his audience in a comedic critical/cultural debate. This, however, might prove harder for others to do, due in no small part to the historical baggage this term has traditionally represented for many.

Just as with the other aforementioned uses of the term by black performers in their art, there appears to be ample room for debate about the appropriateness of the word within the context of the *Chappelle's Show* skit, which was created by Chappelle himself. Likewise, with regards to the appropriateness of the word as it is used by those other artists, the debate about the appropriateness of its use on the *Chappelle's Show* might be one without

a clear resolution. This study presents a twofold analysis of “The Nigger Family” in which an act-by-act textual reading of the skit is provided, followed by observations from black individuals regarding their perceptions of the word *nigger* – not just by how it is featured within the *Chappelle’s Show* skit, but how it is also displayed in other entertainment outside of the show, as well as how it is become prominently embedded in everyday life/everyday vernacular usage by various individuals, blacks and non-blacks alike.

The textual reading of the skit attempts to analyze the linguistic placement of the word throughout each act, detailing how the comedic deployment of the word calls to mind disparaging stereotypes regarding blacks (ranging from the types of food widely perceived to be favored by blacks to their supposed lack of punctuality), in addition to how the utterance of the word throughout the skit evokes various ways by which some blacks have taken to using it as a term of endearment/insult in addressing each other. The ways in which these stereotypes, endearments, and insults function in a larger manner in society are addressed in the reading, ways that (perhaps) make the application of the word *nigger* to a white family like the Niggers ironic, especially and patently so to those who are already familiar with such everyday life deployments of the word.

By engaging in one-on-one, in-depth interviews with a small group of black individuals, this study attempts to understand the ways by which these participants view this word within the context of the *Chappelle’s Show* skit. Additionally, this study seeks to understand the ways that respondents interpret the prevalence of *nigger* both inside and outside of entertainment, and to explore whether or not any collective constructions of the word – constructions that are formulated amongst the individual interpretations of the word – exists within these contexts. Given the qualitative nature of this study, no attempt will be

made to offer a declarative theoretical explanation about such interpretations among a larger group of blacks. Rather, the objective is to understand how the interpretive process of the word among *this* select group of participants might operate within the context of the *Chappelle's Show*, throughout entertainment, and outside of entertainment (i.e. – in everyday life).

No pretenses were made beforehand with the participants of this study regarding their own life beliefs and values, let alone their beliefs regarding the prevalence of the word *nigger* across various contexts. With that said, this study does take the stance that black individuals around the globe – although largely sharing many of the same life experiences (for instance, the struggles for socio/economic/political equality that have resulted from longstanding dealings with racism) – are by no means a monolithic demographic; indeed, black individuals the world over vary from one another when it comes to their own beliefs and value systems.

The skin complexion of blacks, with all of its potential social consequences/experiences that it can bring, may play a crucial role in how they view the world. However, just as many would deem it imprudent to assume that individuals belonging to other non-black racial groups all think alike based on the color of their skin, the same courtesy should be applied to blacks around the world regarding the individual beliefs and values of all within the demographic. In this sense, the methodological approach of this study echoes the sentiments of scholar Patricia Hill Collins' work in black feminist studies, namely the paradigm of the *standpoint theory* that she helped to create.

With standpoint theory, Collins makes it clear that it “places less emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups than on the social conditions that construct such groups” (1997, p. 375). Regarding African-American women, she says that

all of them “face similar challenges that result from living in a society that historically and routinely derogates women of African descent” (2000, p. 25). Expounding on this observation, she states that:

Despite differences of age, sexual orientation, social class, region, and religion, U.S. Black women encounter societal practices that restrict us to inferior housing, neighborhoods, schools, jobs, and public treatment and hide this differential consideration behind an array of common beliefs about Black women’s intelligence, work habits, and sexuality. These common challenges in turn result in recurring patterns of experiences for individual group members. (2000, p. 25)

While acknowledging the many struggles that black women have long faced in America, she has also declared the following regarding individual responses to such stigmas:

Despite the common challenges confronting African-American women as a group, individual Black women neither have identical experiences nor interpret experiences in a similar fashion. The existence of core themes [ex. – black women’s struggles against racism and sexism] does not mean that African-American women respond to these themes in the same way. Differences among individual black women [such as age, sexual orientation, social class, region, and religion] produce different patterns of experiential knowledge that in turn shape individual reactions to the core themes. (2000, p. 27)

In detailing the observations of participants regarding how they interpret the word *nigger* across the aforementioned contexts, the spirit of Collins’ work (i.e. – the potential diversity of individual response) is used as a touchstone. Rather than generalizability, the varying individual sentiments of participants – specifically, the varying depths of responses that the in-depth interview method can uncover, and which thus makes it a quite useful approach for this project – are what this study ultimately uses as its bread-and-butter data objective, and what it aims to successfully attain by ascribing to the philosophies of Collins and other adherents in the presentation of final results.

NIGGER

Throughout the history of the English language, there are arguably fewer words more controversial, more invective, and more injurious than that of *nigger*. Regardless of whether the word is uttered in public or private, on display in a book, in a popular form of entertainment, or spray-painted on the side of a building or home, the mere presence of the term has long been such an emotional lightning rod for many that it easily fits Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary's description as being "perhaps the most offensive and inflammatory racial slur in English" (n.d., usage entry, preceded by def. 3).

Known by many as a term of disparagement used to describe a black person, *nigger*, according to Kennedy (2002), has become more than just a run-of-the-mill ethnic slur used against such individuals. Rather, *nigger* has become an epithet of a larger emotional magnitude for many in this demographic, one that "has constituted a major and menacing presence that has sometimes shifted the course of their lives" (p. 12).

Some of the recent academic literature devoted to the discussion of controversial language has specifically touched upon the specter of *nigger*. Himma (2002), in his analysis of the term's treatment by Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, declares the term to be "the most offensive racial slur in the English language" (p. 512), and that "no other word comes close to provoking the animosity and hurt provoked by this slur" (p. 512). Echoing these sentiments is Henderson (2003), who in her dictionary analyses of slur words proclaims the following:

[T]he term in its full form has become unspeakable and has now acquired a taboo associated with the most obscene word of the English language: *the n-word* parallels the *f-word* 'fuck.' It is a word to be avoided at all costs.... (p. 65, italics in original)

Looking at the word within the context of its place in American history, Kennedy (2002) states that *nigger* “has become the best known of the American language’s many racial insults” (p. 27). Going back more than a century earlier, Kennedy cited the writings of Hosea Easton (1837), who explained that the word represented:

[A]n opprobrious term, employed to impose contempt upon [African-Americans] as an inferior race.... The term in itself would be perfectly harmless were it used only to distinguish one class of society from another; but it is not used with that.... [I]t flows from the fountain of purpose to injure.” (as cited by Kennedy, 2002, p. 5; cited by Easton in original, p. 40)

The word *nigger* – in and of itself – as a racial slur, combined with many of the socio/economic/political struggles that African-Americans have faced throughout their existence in America as a consequence of their skin color, arguably sets the uniqueness and severity of the word apart from many other controversial linguistic terms. Subsequently, it is perhaps set apart from the uniqueness and severity of other racial/ethnic epithets as well, a distinction that is detailed in the ensuing section.

NIGGER IN THE CONTEXT OF AMERICAN RACISM

The beginnings of the American Reconstruction-era in 1865 marked the first attempts of a nation to legally enfranchise newly emancipated blacks with the social, political, and economic rights of freed American persons. By this time, the pejorative definition of *nigger* had already appeared in the writings of Hosea Easton, predating the beginning of this period by 29 years.

In spite of the various obstacles that African-Americans of the time were facing in their attempts of making racial equality a reality, optimism for a post-Civil War era of

national reconciliation and racial understanding was unquestionably in existence among many Americans, including blacks themselves. As African-Americans were not only counting on social, political, legal, and economic equality to transform their standard of living as newly emancipated citizens, they were also most certainly counting on such a transformation to legitimize their dignity as human beings in the eyes of white America.

Subsequently, where there may have been hopes regarding such a day in which black dignity would be recognized and whereby racism in the nation could eventually be overcome, it could be reasoned that *nigger* would no longer be commonly used to refer to blacks individually or as a demographic. Such a need for racial recognition, legitimization, and thus acceptance from white America could be expressed in the following observation from Frantz Fanon in his seminal book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), in which he makes note of this white-black relational dynamic:

Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other, that other will remain the theme of his actions. It is on that other being, on recognition by that other being, that his own human worth and reality depend. It is that other being in whom the meaning of his life is condensed. (pp. 216-217)

The collapse of Reconstruction by 1877 – a product of the defeat of Republican Party governments throughout the South and the enactment of laws in the various states designed to keep the races separate – gave rise to a new era of racially segregationist legal policies commonly referred to as *Jim Crow*. Although operating under the premise of “separate but equal,” by this time it had become widely evident among many that such policies had restricted the access of African-Americans to public facilities deemed inadequate and inferior to those established for whites. Additionally, the voting rights requirements that Southern

state governments had begun establishing for individuals were perceived by many African-Americans (as well as some whites) as being discriminatory toward the demographic.

The era of Jim Crow would carry on into the beginning of the twentieth century, with organizations such as the newly revamped Ku Klux Klan rising to prominence by using intimidation and violence toward African-Americans, sympathetic white politicians, and sympathetic white citizens as a means of keeping legally segregationist policies intact. The racial tension and hostility taking hold during the era was, nonetheless, being met by calls for civil rights by African-Americans and willing whites, even going as far back to the 1896 “separate but equal” court battle of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The consciousness for civil rights in America would continue throughout the new century, meeting head-on an increasing atmosphere of racial violence that was manifested in the form of race-related lynchings, mob beatings, cross burnings, and firebombings of churches and homes directed at African-Americans and their supporters.

Within this milieu of increased anti-African-American sentiment, it seemed as though *nigger* had become a word of choice among whites in expressing ill feelings toward blacks as individuals and as a collective demographic holding aspirations of racial equality. Of the word’s symbolic prevalence in American history in general and popular culture in particular, Kennedy (2002) states that “*Nigger* has seeped into practically every aspect of American culture, from literature to political debates, from cartoons to song. Throughout the 1800s and for much of the 1900s as well, writers of popular music generated countless lyrics that lampooned blacks...” (p. 6, italics in original).

Putting the raw feelings about the word to prose, writer/poet Countee Cullen articulated the painful experiences of being called *nigger* in his 1925 poem “Incident”:

Once riding in Old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.
Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December:
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember. (1920, p. 15; also cited by Hughes, 1940, p. 269)

By the 1950's, as the Civil Rights movement gained important victories like the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court verdict, and with the start a year later of the successful Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott, the confluence of the movement's growing influence and its opposition from segregationist factions contributed to escalating racial tensions playing out in public dramas. Such an increasingly publicized racial tinderbox was noted by Greene (1995) in her discussion of the Civil Rights movement as it progressed into the 1960s:

[W]e observed film footage that graphically portrayed the violence associated with racist epithets [epithets which included that of *nigger*]. This footage helped us to understand the relationship between hate speech and the question of equality both emotionally and intellectually. We were officially embarrassed and ashamed of these frank demonstrations of hate. And we seemed to understand that words as well as actions played a key role in a regime of separation and subordination. We also knew that certain words were audible reminders of an ideology of racial supremacy and inferiority, and that such language signaled a rejection of the ideal of equality we hoped to belatedly embrace. (para. 4)

Similar sentiments about the word were uttered during the Jim Crow era by the venerated African-American writer/poet Langston Hughes, who commented in 1940 that *nigger* "to colored people of high and low degree is like a red rag to a bull" (p. 268), which evokes a litany of unpleasant mental images for blacks:

The word *nigger*, you see, sums up for us who are colored all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America: the slave-beatings of yesterday, the lynchings of today, the Jim Crow cars, the only movie show in town with its sign up FOR WHITES ONLY [author's capitalizations], the restaurants where you may not eat, the jobs you may not have, the unions you cannot join. The word *nigger* in the mouths of little white boys at school, the word *nigger* in the mouths of foremen on the job, the word *nigger* across the whole face of America! *Nigger! Nigger!* Like the word *Jew* in Hitler's Germany. (p. 269, italics in original)

With the appearance thirty years later of the essay *What America Would Be Like Without Blacks*, another acclaimed black writer, Ralph Ellison, discussed the word's relevance to white America (which also included new white immigrants to the country) as a social and cultural signifier, a linguistic demarcation against which they could measure their own self-worth to the country:

Since the beginning of the nation, white Americans have suffered from a deep inner uncertainty as to who they really are. One of the ways that has been used to simplify the answer has been to seize upon the presence of black Americans and use them as a marker, a symbol of limits, a metaphor for the "outsider." Many whites could look at the social position of blacks and feel that color formed an easy and reliable gauge for determining to what extent one was or was not American. Perhaps that is why one of the first epithets that many Europeans learned when they got off the boat was the term "nigger;" it made them feel instantly American. (p. 55)

The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, as well as other legislative policies designed to ameliorate past race-based injustices have since helped to end legalized segregation in America, thus drawing the era of Jim Crow to a close. Nevertheless, the pejorative connotation of the word undoubtedly persists in the (supposedly more) modern day and age, whether it is used in the privacy of one's home for the purposes of castigating African-descended persons, or if it is used in a more public display, such as at Ku Klux Klan rallies.

Taking the aforementioned comments of Hughes (1940) and Greene (1995) into consideration, it could be reasoned that this negative connotation of the word still possesses

the potential to generate just as much controversy, discomfort, and emotional hurt as it did during the time of Jim Crow. As summed up by Pilgrim and Middleton (2001), “[n]igger, like the false impression that it incorporates and means, puts down Blacks, and rationalizes their abuse. ...Historically, nigger more than any other word capture[s] the personal hatred and institutionalized racism toward Blacks. It still does” (ending para.).

In recent years however, a different way of looking at the term has received much publicity and debate. Particularly through mainstream American entertainment, a rearticulated meaning of *nigger* has become a popular utterance among African-American artists. Outside the realm of mainstream entertainment, this new definition of an old slur has become frequently utilized among African-Americans as well. This particular phenomenon of deconstructing *nigger* from its pejorative roots, whereby the word is reconstructed into entirely new meanings for artists and entertainment consumers of African descent, could be said to represent the premise of **social constructionism**, a concept that is a major area of focus for this study.

RESEARCH STUDY

The idea of individuals creating and sharing meaning with each other, and the historical factors (personal, demographic, and societal) influencing these constructions, are what lie at the core of the **social construction of reality** premise. Subsequently, this premise might explain the usage and popularity of the word *nigger* by black individuals in general, and black artists such as comedians, hip-hop musicians, and writers in particular.

Influenced by those that came before them, these artists have taken to using the word in their own works as a means of rearticulating, recontextualizing, and reappropriating it from its historically pejorative roots, similar to the “strategy of subversion through overuse” described by Kennedy (2002, p. 38). The *Chappelle’s Show* skit is just one instance of this word’s prominence in a form of entertainment that is popular in general, and particularly popular among blacks. Nonetheless, questions remain as to why some black media consumers patronize forms of entertainment that frequently make mention of the word *nigger*, while others may be less willing to do so.

Some of the views of cultural studies writers and mass communication researchers indicate a level of skepticism regarding the ability of audiences to construct oppositional readings of media messages, texts, and imagery. As such, these theorists might just as likely be skeptical about the possibility of positive interpretations being constructed among black audiences from that of *nigger*.

Taking all sides and sentiments of this debate into consideration, what exactly would the modern meaning of the word *nigger* represent for black audiences, as it is used both inside and outside of popular entertainment? How do these audience members explain their respective constructions/reconstructions of this word?

How much could racism – specifically, the historical prevalence of racism in general, its prevalence in popular culture in particular, and interview participants’ own possible first-hand experiences with it – inform their interpretations of the word within the contexts of both society and popular culture/entertainment? Does this explain the reasons why they largely view *nigger* in these contextual ways?

Utilizing the conceptual approach of social constructionism, this study seeks to understand how black persons/persons of African descent interpret the word *nigger* within the context of its utterance on the *Chappelle's Show*, within entertainment/popular culture, and outside the world of entertainment. Such a project asks the following questions:

- RQ1: To what extent do black audience members regard the word *nigger* – as it appears within the context of the *Chappelle's Show* – in either its traditionally pejorative sense or as a reconstructed term, apart from its commonly perceived meaning?
- RQ2: To what extent do black audience members regard the word *nigger* – as it appears within various forms of popular entertainment – in either its traditionally pejorative sense or as a reconstructed term, apart from its commonly perceived meaning?
- RQ3: To what extent do black audience members regard the word *nigger* – as it appears outside the world of popular entertainment (in everyday life) – in either its traditionally pejorative sense or as a reconstructed term, apart from its commonly perceived meaning?

The beginning of the second chapter is devoted to an analysis of the *social construction of reality*, a sociological concept that explains how individuals place meaning onto various objects, how such meanings are shared among other like-minded individuals, and what such meanings represent to all of them. After touching upon how such a concept might apply to that of the term *nigger*, synopses of cultural studies writings and studies are provided, all of which postulate on the myriad ways by which media audiences construct symbolic meaning from various media texts, messages, and imagery, and what such media represent for these audiences. Following the review of cultural studies writings, opinions and sentiments are offered from those who not only proclaim the incapability of *nigger* as representing anything different from its pejorative connotation, but who also believe it

impossible to positively interpret (or “read”) entertainment representations of black identity most often perceived as demeaning to the demographic. The purpose of these sections is not solely limited to noting the prospective place of this study within the ongoing debate of race and identity in general, and the inclusion of this debate within the arena of media/entertainment in particular. These sections also aim to present information necessary to understanding/underscoring the enlightenment that the findings of this study could potentially contribute to these debates.

The third chapter provides a background of the *Chappelle’s Show*, as well as an act-by-act analysis of “The Nigger Family” skit. The fourth chapter covers the methods section, which gives information pertaining to the sample of participants used for the audience analysis portion of this study, as well as information regarding the collection and analysis of data. The fifth chapter presents the observations of participants regarding their interpretation of the word *nigger* in the *Chappelle’s Show* episode, throughout entertainment and in everyday life. The sixth and final chapter of this study discusses the overall findings and subsequent implications concerning social constructionism and the word *nigger* across the contexts in question, in addition to providing concluding remarks regarding not just the study, but also as to how it applies to the real-life/real world debate over the word.

CHAPTER II

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

The **social construction of reality** is a concept that focuses on ways in which individuals of certain groups construct and share meaning with each other. First explained by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their 1967 eponymously titled book *The Social Construction of Reality*, the application of this concept has subsequently expanded beyond the sociology field for which it was initially developed and into the area of mass communication, where it has achieved relevance in the explanation of how audiences construct meanings of mediated texts and imagery.

According to Berger and Luckmann (1967), such meaning is dependent on the subjective interpretations that individuals ascribe to various aspects (i.e. – objects) of life, which are explained by three sets of mental references that guide in the construction of meaning: *signs*, *symbols*, and *typification schemes*. These mental references, or objects, are utilized by individuals in the process of communicating with others, whereby this communicative process establishes agreed-upon meaning for the objects in question.

Within the mental reference set of individuals, signs and symbols serve nearly the same purpose in that both represent objects that are ascribed certain meaning by individuals, meaning that is subsequently shared within the groups in which the individuals associate. A closer inspection, however, reveals differences in how these objects serve as meanings for individuals and groups.

As objects – physical or otherwise – that are placed upon a specific meaning, *signs* serve as a representation of an intentionally constructed purpose, or as an “explicit intention to serve as an index of subjective meanings” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 35). For example, an object such as a knife may be used for a variety of purposes such as hunting, eating food, or causing injury to someone. If someone wants to throw that knife at another person’s door, that could be a sign of the intent to cause injury. That same intention to commit harm could also be represented by another sign, such as painting an X-mark on that same person’s door.

Symbols differ from signs in that these objects are of a more abstract form of representation than signs are. Unlike signs, symbols are objects that serve as representations of other objects. Examples of symbols are slang terms/colloquialisms used to describe certain items, as well as those of creative designs and logos, to name a couple.

The meanings of signs and symbols can be constructed amongst individuals over periods of time, resulting in the organization of these objects into a mental reference set that is drawn upon during the communication process, a reference set known as the *social stock of knowledge*. From this reference set come the *typification schemes* utilized by individuals, which serve as guideposts as to how information within the social stock of knowledge is to be interpreted and shared amongst individuals. As stated by Berger and Luckmann (1967), “[t]he social stock of knowledge... supplies [one] with the typificatory schemes required for the major routines of everyday life, not only the typifications of others..., but typifications of all sorts of events and experiences, both social and natural” (p. 43).

A sociological concept that postulates the flexibility of objects to be interpreted in a variety of ways, the premise of social constructionism is one that at its core stresses the

diversity of communicative processes. These processes, which assign various meanings to objects for various individuals within groups, involve the construction of a particular language enabling communication.

The word *nigger*, no matter its historical connotation and/or its verbal intent, represents language. Applying this particular language to the social construction of reality concept, the word would be open to collective interpretation in numerous fashions. Additionally, the varying interpretations of the word are subject to being defined within different contexts as well – with one context in particular, the media, being noteworthy for its public prominence and importance.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM, *NIGGER*, AND THE MEDIA

One could surely have a long-lasting discussion about the difference(s) between signs and symbols, a discussion that could be applied to mass communication when the objects of audience interpretation are the various messages, texts, and imagery emanating from the media. This certainly could be the case when the media object in question is that of a racial slur word, which as an epithet serves as a replacement for the commonly accepted name of a particular racial/ethnic demographic.

Taking into consideration the idea that symbols are objects representing other objects, as well as considering the fact that such objects might serve as abstractions of some noteworthy phenomena, it might be best to think of these mediated meanings as symbols more so than signs in the application of social constructionism to active audiences. As such, the term *nigger* might likewise be best regarded as denoting a symbol as well, especially

when considering how the word serves as an alternate name/categorization/designation (albeit a traditionally pejorative one) for a more official name/categorization/designation of a particular demographic – i.e., *nigger* serves as an object (or abstraction) for the more traditionally-regarded term of “black,” “African,” or “African-American.”

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND AUDIENCES

In the wake of the development of the social construction of reality concept in the 1960’s, various writings of cultural theorists, as well as studies conducted with media consumers, have focused on how audiences interpret media messages, texts, and imagery. Much of the work in this area rarely references social constructionism or Berger and Luckmann (1967) by name, perhaps due to the fact that this concept was initially developed for its application to the field of sociology. However, core assumptions about how symbolic meanings are constructed by groups, in addition to understanding what these meanings represent for specific groups, are very much evident throughout these writings and studies, subsequently reflecting the spirit of social constructionism. These assumptions include examples such as the cultural symbolism and meaning that some mediated texts possessed for particular demographics who interpreted them, the explanation for why these texts resonated amongst the groups, and the different (or oppositional) meanings by which some of these texts were interpreted apart from their original constructions from producers.

Gamson, Crouteau, Hoynes, and Sasson (1992) talk about media messages as providing “a many-voiced, open text that can and often is read oppositionally, at least in part” (p. 373). They further expand on this possibility, stating the following:

The undetermined nature of media discourse allows plenty of room for challengers such as social movements to offer competing constructions of reality and to find support for them from readers whose daily lives may lead them to construct meaning in ways that go beyond imagery. (p. 373)

The potential flexibility of media content – particularly its messages, texts, and imagery – might also be understood by Eco’s (1979) postulation that “[t]he multiplicity of codes, contexts, and circumstances shows us that the same message can be decoded from different points of view and by reference to diverse systems of conventions” (p. 139). This interpretive process can perhaps be more clearly comprehended by individually looking at the separate components of *codes*, *contexts*, *circumstances*, and *conventions*.

Codes can be thought of as representations for a piece of information, which can come in the form of signs or symbols. As a symbol that can either represent a historically denigrating term or one that has been subverted for the purposes of racial empowerment, the word *nigger* might be one example of a symbolic code, which can take on a meaning specific to an individual interpreting it.

Contexts can be considered to be other information surrounding a particular piece of information. As it relates to an example such as that of the word *nigger*, media/popular entertainment, politics, and everyday reality might be particular contexts/settings by which the word can be situated and thus interpreted.

What individuals interpreting the word know about that particular piece of information could be regarded as *circumstances*. Pertaining to *nigger*, circumstances can take into account the historical meanings that individuals attach to the word, which could range from historical denigration on one extreme to empowerment on the other, depending on one’s point of view.

Consequently, the ways/constructive processes by which individuals interpret this information, which take into account the codes, contexts, and circumstances, can be described as the *conventions* of the decoding process. With the example of *nigger*, the various conventions that individuals may utilize in their interpretations of the word are similarly informed by codes, contexts, and circumstances.

Speaking to the idea of audiences constructing meaning from television content, Fiske (1990) asserts that this process is also similar to how individuals interpret messages that emanate from outside the medium:

The production of meaning from a text follows much the same process as the construction of subjectivity within society. The reader produces meanings that derive from the intersection of his/her *social history* with the *social forces* structured into the text. (p. 82, italics added for emphasis)

The social history that Fiske mentions seems to suggest a parallel to Eco's (1979) observations of how individuals decode messages (or *social forces*, as Fiske might refer to them) by their own ways, or *conventions*. This is also echoed in the observations of Wicks (2001), who writes about how pre-existing attitudes, beliefs, and opinions serve as a mental reference (i.e. – schema) that individuals draw upon in their interpretations of media information:

We must...understand the contribution of the audience members in the construction of social reality. Messages are not uniformly understood and interpreted by different audience members. Rather each audience member uses communication to build on knowledge stored in cognitive schemas in the course of interpreting messages and developing new knowledge. (pp. 28-29)

The personal history of individuals, particularly as members belonging to a certain demographic, has been the focus of various studies investigating how groups construct cultural meanings from television content. Such work was pioneered by Morley's (1980) analyses of meanings that British television viewers attached to the news program

Nationwide. These analyses – culled from the pairing of individuals into focus groups based on having one or more shared demographic traits with others in the groups – found that one’s political/ideological orientation was more influential in how overall meanings from the news programs were constructed by the groups, even more so than one’s social position.

Studies in ensuing years focused on how specific racial/ethnic groups constructed meanings from mediated texts, and what such meanings came to represent for these groups. In Australia, Hodge and Tripp (1986) examined the television preferences of a group of Aboriginal children, finding them to be avid consumers of American-imported television shows, particularly identifying with the African-American characters of these shows. The authors declare that the longstanding racial stigmatization of Aborigines by many white Australians informs the ways in which these children construct meaning from television, in that the children take a vested interest in the outcomes of on-screen African-American characters that face conflicts with whites. In these instances, the black characters are associated as being “good” ones by the Aboriginal children, supporting the characters during their on-screen trials and tribulations.

Liebes and Katz (1990) focused on the genre of the soap opera – long characterized by many television critics and viewers as vacuous entertainment – in their analyses of how different ethnic audience groups interpreted the prime-time serial *Dallas*. Among the Israeli groups they interviewed, there was favorable reaction to the show – which was displayed by such examples as the suspension of business affairs in one community during broadcast of the show, active conversation about the show the day after its broadcast, and the prevalence of sentiment that viewing the show represented belonging to the mainstream of Israeli society.

For fans such as these, soap operas, according to Livingstone (1990), allow for the opportunity to “explore a multiplicity of relevant perspectives on the issues (for example, the problematic and conflicting expectations of modern marriage), which implicate but are not resolved by cultural myths, social knowledge, and commonsense discourses” (p. 53). On the other hand, Liebes and Katz (1990) noted that Moroccan Jews and Arabs perceived *Dallas* as promoting immorality and conspicuous consumption, which these groups believe is endemic of Western societies, “where American cultural imperialism, now including Israel, is identified with colonialism and domination” (p. 153).

Nonetheless, soap operas have been found to provide important cultural meanings for various audiences around the world, especially in Latin American societies, where such shows (also known as *telenovelas*) address various “controversial political and social themes such as agrarian reform, racism, abortion, drug abuse, environmental degradation, homosexuality, corruption, and cloning,... [particularly in Brazil]” (Rêgo, 2003, para. 6, “In the End”). In her analysis of how Brazilian audiences interpreted the nineteenth-century period piece telenovela *Terra Nostra*, Porto (2005) found that the show was particularly useful in educating viewers (especially women) about the various social and political concerns of that time in the country’s history, such as the abolishment of slavery, class struggles between immigrants and their landowning employers, and the attitudes of Brazilians toward the country’s government and monarchy.

Rios (2003) also looked at the meanings that Latin American audiences attached to soap operas, which included both Spanish and English-speaking serials. She states that “[f]ortifying sociocultural glue among family members is of concern among Latinos” (p. 62), and in noting that her respondents watched such shows along with other family members, she

declares that an important cultural activity was reinforced. Additionally, she found that these telenovelas were quite popular amongst her female participants, who identified with on-screen women protagonists working to surmount personal obstacles on the road to their life ambitions, finding inspiration in these characters that synchronized with their own real-life struggles as Latinas in America.

For black female audiences, Bobo (1995) noted that “[f]or all the critical discussion generated by black women’s texts that achieve any degree of success, little attention is paid to their significance for black female cultural consumers” (p. 1). To address this lack of attention, Bobo set out to explore the cultural meanings this demographic constructed from two books, the cinematic adaptations of these books, and an original motion picture featuring black female protagonists – *Waiting to Exhale*, *The Color Purple*, and *Daughters of the Dust*, respectively.

In response to various criticisms that these works promoted, among other things, rampant 1990’s materialism (*Waiting to Exhale*) and false impressions of black life in the early to mid 20th century American South (the cinematic adaptation of *The Color Purple*), in addition to being too incomprehensible and unmarketable for a large receptive audience (*Daughters of the Dust*), Bobo (1995) found that her participants identified with various themes of the texts. Among the meanings most resonant for participants were the presence of strong-willed women who did not require approval or assistance from white society (*Waiting to Exhale*); the ability to identify with female protagonists experiencing life hardships, whereby the heroines strength and resolve served as a source of inspiration for real-life black women in their own day-to-day struggles (*The Color Purple*); as well as the importance of strong familial bonds among generations of black women (*Daughters of the Dust*).

Looking at the meanings African-Americans constructed from advertising memorabilia, Motley, Henderson, and Baker (2003) found that respondents in their study were able to construct oppositional symbolic interpretations from collectibles featuring images and depictions traditionally deemed as demeaning to their demographic. Motley et al. reported that these items, which have become popular in recent years among African-American memorabilia collectors, served as necessary reminders of past historical struggles of African-Americans. Additionally, items such as the (in)famous Aunt Jemima collectibles were reinterpreted by many respondents apart from their commonly perceived “mammy” image, whereby the vision of an overweight, non-feminine black maid is transformed into that of a selfless black matriarch, symbolic of elder women found in many of these families.

All of these various writings and studies have looked at how audiences construct meaning(s) relevant to their group. The following section looks at how audiences – informed by the spirits of social constructionist tenets – are constructing meaning from the word *nigger*, meaning that for them represents something different from the term’s traditionally pejorative connotation. Although some of the most well-known attempts of doing so throughout time might have begun on an individual level, the rearticulation of the term during the ages has also been done on a collective/group/demographic basis as well, thus factoring in the presence of the social construction of reality.

THE NEW MEANING OF *NIGGER*

Utterance of the term *nigger* among African-Americans has received significant attention in recent years, primarily because of its well-publicized use in various forms of popular entertainment. However, such usage of the term among the demographic is not an entirely new phenomenon. This particular utterance of the word among African-Americans had previously been used during crucial periods of American history, with one of the chief purposes being for the creation of demographic in-group jokes. According to Kennedy (2002), these jokes – created during these eras when important social concerns pertaining to African-Americans were given significant attention on the nation’s mainstream radar – served various purposes, such as “lampoon[ing] slavery” (p. 34), “dramatiz[ing] the tragic reality of Jim Crow subjugation” (p. 35), or to “satirize ‘legal’ disenfranchisement” (p. 35).

Within the literary world, white author Carl Van Vechten – a champion of the Harlem Renaissance movement – seized upon the opportunity to rearticulate the term with the 1926 release of his book *Nigger Heaven*, which told the story of the lives and aspirations of several individuals living in the New York City neighborhood of Harlem. According to Holmes (2006), the title of the book – which had previously been a reference to describe the segregated African-American seating areas of movie theaters and places of worship – not only was Van Vechten’s way of rearticulating the word, but also signified a big part of his literary love letter to the artistic, stylistic, and cultural sensibilities of Harlem, of which Van Vechten was a devotee:

Nigger Heaven speaks to geographical space in the construction of black voice. For racist America, ‘Nigger Heaven’ signified derogatorily the balconies where blacks were segregated in predominately white churches and theaters. Later, whites used

this descriptor to objectify Harlem, a place into which Southern black migrants were redlined in droves.

But in keeping with its rich oral tradition, particularly “signifying,” African Americans transformed the image of Harlem, inscribing language that helped to create an artistically, socially, politically, and economically conscious community where many whites expected only chaos and primitivism. (p. 297)

Lending support to Van Vechten for his choice of book title after he was accused by many of racial insensitivity, Langston Hughes (1940), in his praise of the book (“...[Van Vechten] writes sympathetically and amusingly and well about a whole rainbow of life above 110th Street that had never before been put into the color of words,” p. 271) and in stating his comprehension of Van Vechten’s intentions (i.e. – understanding that Van Vechten was referring to the segregated sections of public theaters and churches that were prevalent in the Jim Crow era), perceived the following:

The strange inability on the part of many of the Negro critics to understand irony, or satire... partially explains the phenomenon of that violent outburst of rage that stirred the Negro press for months after the appearance of Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*. (p. 268, italics in original)

The attempted literary transformation of the word would move to a non-fictional realm in later years with the publication in 1967 of *The Nigger Bible*. Written by Yale-educated author Robert deCoy, the book – which was released during the confluence of the era’s nonviolence-based civil rights movements and an emerging black militant consciousness spearheaded by such organizations as the Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam – served as a missive to black America to reclaim and reshape demographic identity away from racist notions propagated by various white establishment institutions. Helming the preface of the book was comedian/activist Dick Gregory, whose own 1964 book detailing his journey from childhood poverty to entertainer to social justice crusader was entitled *Nigger: An Autobiography* – a work that he dedicated to his mother, personally relaying to

her that “[w]herever you are, if you ever hear the word ‘nigger’ again, remember that they are advertising my book” (p. 5). Prefacing *The Nigger Bible*, he declared that:

deCoy has initiated the first attempt to change the Nigger’s “State of Mind” in order that he can learn his Nigger existence as a complete State to dignify his Nigger Existence as a complete State of Being – the essence of the Gentile Being existing outside of the Judeo-Christian laws, morally and spiritually. (p. 14)

Addressing his readers as “sons and daughters,” deCoy’s narrative voice seemed to function in the manner of a militant-minded black wise man, imparting knowledge not only to the many readers who were certainly facing stringent racial oppression in the present times, but also to the young and unborn who would most likely face similar consequences in the future. Included in the book was a dictionary of various words – *nigrite* words as he called them, *nigrite* meaning a “Black descendant born and bred in the United States” (p. 37). Among the many words listed was that of *nigger*, which he labeled as being the “[s]ame as Nigrite; used by American Caucasians and so-called Negroes to refer to a person of low degree or class” (p. 33).

While widespread positive rearticulation/acceptance of *nigger* in 1967 may have been much to ask of many, for deCoy and like-minded others, the embrace of the word appeared to represent a recognition by many blacks of their “outsider” status in a country teeming with racial hostility, an effort to reclaim and reinterpret black identity away from false notions perpetuated by racist white power structures, and a consequential acceptance of the word that represents an action of both racial status recognition and identity transformation. This might be especially apparent when this definition of the word is observed alongside his take on the term *negro*, a commonplace racial designation for “black” (a literal Spanish translation) that was previously used by many blacks and whites alike, which by the late 1960’s was becoming an appellative anachronism among many blacks who perceived it as a Jim Crow-

era linguistic relic, and which was increasingly being replaced in favor of “black” or “African-American.” Of *negro*, deCoy states that the term was “manufactured to describe those Niggers who would waste their existence in the hopeless void of eventually dying as Christian Caucasians” (pp. 25-26), a term he interpreted as being both a “vulgar but accepted description of the Nigrate or Nigger” (p. 33) and a “brainwashed Black who would be a Caucasian if possible” (p. 33). Proclaiming the understanding of his definitions as sacrosanct to the process of black self-empowerment, he offers the following:

Try using the words that I leave you here, learn well their definitions. You will find that as you master them as well as their meanings, they will not only become precious to you, but you will develop a special sense of comfort and spiritual security the likes of which you have never known before.

To the extent that you reject these words and their definition is the very marked degree to which you have already been brainwashed. I abjure you to accept this fact. If you do not, I simply lose you to the speed and the power of the Alabaster [i.e. – white racist] process of which now I write to impede or destroy completely. (p. 28)

The rejection of *negro* – of which he defined as a particularly deferential black person (or a construct symbolizing such a black person) that was all-too-ready to please white America – was also delineated two years later in the political memoir *Die Nigger Die* by H. “Rap” Brown, then the Justice Minister for the Black Panthers:

Negroes have always been close allies of whites in trying to eliminate Black resistance to undesirable acculturation. Negroes see poor and unconstitutionalized Blacks as niggers. They find it necessary to prove to whites that they are not niggers, failing to realize that whites see all Black people as niggers, no matter how rich or poor.

Some Blacks prefer to be called negroes because they like to distinguish themselves from other Blacks. They fear that if they called themselves Blacks, they might antagonize whites. And if they antagonized whites, they would lose their position as negroes – the white-appointed overseers of Blacks. Thus, negroes have always tried to aid and impress whites by eliminating Blackness. (pp. xxxix-xxxx)

Brown, who in later years would convert to Islam and become known as Jamil Al-Amin, spoke of the subsequent positive reclamation of *nigger* by the following way, in the process separating such a person from that of a *negro*:

The negro, being unable to recognize who is the true enemy, becomes an enemy of Blacks. Negroes prefer “living” to being free.

To be Black in this country is to be a nigger. To be a nigger is to resist both white and negro death. It is to be free in spirit, of not body. It is the spirit of resistance which has prepared Blacks for the ultimate struggle. This word, “nigger,” which is taboo in negro and white america [author’s lower case “a” in America], becomes meaningful in the Black community. (pp. xxxx-xxxxi)

During this crucial period of heightened racial awareness that encapsulated the 1960’s, controversial white comedian Lenny Bruce famously utilized the arena of popular culture/entertainment to frequently explore the deconstruction/reconstruction of *nigger* in his many stand-up routines and concert recordings. Described by Kennedy (2002) as using a “strategy of subversion through overuse” (p. 38), Bruce often employed the term in his art as a means of engaging his audiences in social commentaries about race and racism. A 1963 routine by Bruce, as cited by Kennedy (2002), explains his method of comedy-as-social critique:

[I]f president Kennedy got on television and said, “Tonight I’d like to introduce the niggers in my cabinet,” and he yelled “Niggerniggerniggerniggerniggernigger” at every nigger he saw...till *nigger* didn’t mean anything anymore, till *nigger* lost its meaning... you’d never hear any four-year old nigger cry when he came home from school. (pp. 38-39, italics in original)

It was also during this decade that African-American comedian Richard Pryor, an obvious disciple of Bruce’s, started his rise to prominence in the entertainment world. In his various routines addressing social topics such as racism, poverty, and numerous other hardships existent in black inner-city America, Pryor often used the word *nigger* in a manner similar to that of Bruce, for the purposes of engaging in social critique – in addition to

playfully using it as both a term of endearment and a putdown – by toying with the negative mental imagery and connotation commonly perceived with the word.

According to Kennedy (2002), Pryor, “brought *nigger* to center stage in stand-up comedy, displaying with consummate artistry its multiple meanings” (p. 39, italics in original). Kennedy also makes the following observation regarding Pryor’s frequent and fearless use of the word in his performances:

[Pryor] seemed radically unconcerned with deferring to any social conventions, particularly those that accepted black comedians as clowns but rejected them as satirists. Nothing more vividly symbolized his defiant, risk-taking spirit than his unprecedented playfulness regarding the explosive N-word in performances before racially mixed audiences. (p. 41)

Although Pryor (who would renounce such usage of the word later in his career) may have been one of the first well-known African-Americans to have utilized *nigger* for the purposes of public art, he would not be among the last. Significantly with the rise of the hardcore rap music genre of “gangsta rap” in the 1980’s, a new generation of African-American artists were not only further pushing the popular utterance of *nigger* into the mainstream of entertainment, but were arguably doing so more than any other well-known figure – black or white – that had preceded them.

Among the first African-American artists (and quite possibly the most well-known of them) to popularize the utterance of *nigger* in rap music was the group NWA, whose name stood for “Niggaz With Attitude.” Arguably the second-most famous rap artist to popularize this usage of the word was the late Tupac Shakur, who famously changed the spelling of the word in his songs from *nigger* to that of *nigga*, which was an acronym for “Never Ignorant in Getting Goals Accomplished” (1992).

According to Dyson (2005), this usage of the word by Shakur, NWA, and other African-American artists represents a process by which “blacks dynamically negotiate offensive, misleading or troubling information” (p. 31) in the construction of a cultural identity. This image of antitypical black identity, which can be defined as one that challenges dominant notions of what normative African-American behavior is supposed to represent, conveys “the expression by blacks of the irreverent meanings of blackness that transgress against received beliefs or accepted norms” (p. 32). Dyson also states the following:

The creation of antitypes – from blaxploitation films to hip-hop music, [and extending to] the comic routines of Richard Pryor... – permits blacks to challenge visions of blackness that exclude the unsavory and the politically incorrect. Antitypes embody efforts to explore the experiences and identities of blacks who are usually kept – because of class status, lack of power, gender and sexual orientation – from being visible in archetypal black representations [that promote idealized images of what ‘blackness’ is supposed to represent]. (pp. 32-33)

Within this context, it could be said that young African-American rap music fans and musicians – both of whom belong to a historically disenfranchised demographic – view the word as “a way of bonding around a term... historically used to denigrate blacks” (Dyson, 2001, p. 131). This communal bonding around the word, according to Dyson, deprives “racist whites of the prerogative of naming blacks in harmful ways, since blacks have adapted it to their culture in playful or at least signifying fashion” (p. 131).

In the years since Lenny Bruce became the first well-known white figure to use the term by the “strategy of subversion” method (Kennedy, 2002, p. 38), the term has taken on increased appropriation among non-African-American public figures, whereby the term is utilized as a means of conveying their own feelings of societal disillusionment. Such examples include John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s “Woman is the Nigger of the World” (1972)

and Patti Smith's "Rock 'N' Roll Nigger" (1978). Additionally, the appropriation of *nigger* by non-African-Americans was demonstrated in the 1970's by the English publication of Pierre Vallières' book *Les Nègres blancs d'Amérique (White Niggers of America)* (1971), which compared the plight of French Canadians to that of African-Americans. A Quebec writer and socialist who aligned himself in the 1960's with the radical group Front de libération du Québec, Vallières believed that the word does not symbolize so much race as it does class status:

For the rich white man of Yankee America, the nigger is a sub-man. Even the poor whites consider the nigger their inferior.... Very often they do not suspect that they too are niggers, slaves, "white niggers." White racism hides the reality from them by giving them the opportunity to despise an inferior, to crush him mentally or to pity him. But the poor whites who despise the black man are doubly niggers, for they are victims of one more form of alienation – racism – which far from liberating them, imprisons them in a net of hate or paralyzes them in fear of one day having to confront the black man in a civil war. (p. 21)

Outside the world of non-fiction literature and popular culture/entertainment, the phenomena of whites "increasingly referring to other whites as niggers" (Kennedy, 2002, p. 174) has even resulted in the coinage of a name for these individuals – *wiggers* (i.e. – *white niggers*). Commenting on the popular usage of *nigger* among other non-blacks, Kennedy (2002) also writes that "indeed, the term both as an insult and as a sign of affection is being affixed to people of all sorts" (p. 174).

The particular moniker of *wiggers*, which has come to be synonymous in the modern era with white individuals enamored (perhaps fanatically) with black/hip-hop culture, actually has its roots in Norman Mailer's 1957 essay "The White Negro (Superficial Reflections of the Hipster)." For Mailer, the "white negro" represented the anti-establishment, existentialist minded, socially disaffected young white individual of the times,

attracted to the seminal and fashionable (i.e. – “hip”) language/slang, music, and style of black culture:

So there was a new breed of adventurers, urban adventurers who drifted out at night looking for action with a black man’s code to fit their facts. The hipster had absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro, and for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro. (p. 279)

Taking a cue in the 1970’s from Mailer’s “white negro” concept, the late rock music critic Lester Bangs – one of the first writers to champion the era’s punk rock music scene burgeoning on both sides of the Atlantic – gained notoriety for a T-shirt he owned declaring him to be one of the “Last of the White Niggers.” While visiting Beat Generation author William S. Burroughs in New York in 1975 (a visit in which he was accompanied by Patti Smith), Bangs sported the shirt in a picture taken by *Creem* magazine photographer Kate Simon (photo included by DeRogatis, 2000, p. 153).

Although there has been a growing trend in recent years of redefining *nigger* among well-known artists and ordinary people of African descent, as well as others who are not of African descent, controversy still exists as to whether or not the word can be reclaimed from its pejorative roots. Perhaps not surprisingly, there are many who still feel as though such an accomplishment is impossible.

CONTINUED CONTROVERSY OVER *NIGGER*

Debate continues to rage as to whether or not the term *nigger* can take on a new meaning among individuals and the groups to which they belong. While there may be many people who use the term as a meaning entirely different from its commonly perceived definition, there are many others who profess the inability of *nigger* as representing anything

apart from what MSN Encarta (2003) describes it as being, that of a “taboo term for a black person” (def. 1).

In response to those who believe in the potential of the word to be reconstructed into a new and popular meaning within the black community, Burton (1994) responds that “[t]oo much history and hostility are conjured up by this word” (p. 33). She also states that she knows that “some blacks use it to describe one another – either as a term of endearment or, most times, of derision” (p. 34), but that it is “partly historic self-hatred taught to us by Whites” (p. 34).

According to Kennedy (2002), individuals like Burton “maintain that blacks’ use of *nigger* is symptomatic of racial self-hatred or the internalization of white racism, thus the rhetorical equivalent of black on black crime” (p. 45, italics in original). While not necessarily taking the side of someone such as Burton (1994), Dyson (2001) considers this position within the context of the ongoing, intra-demographic debate over the utterance of *nigger* among blacks:

Black revisionists argue that by rhetorically seizing the venomous term, blacks can deprive it of some of its harmful effects. I am surely a revisionist on this score, though I understand the misgivings of [others] who contend the term is well beyond rehabilitation. (p. 147)

As far as *nigger* representing a term of endearment among non-black persons (particularly among whites), skepticism exists as to whether the utterance of the word among such individuals is appropriate, with Dyson (2001) declaring that “most of black America is uncomfortable with whites’ use of the term, even those whites who support hip-hop culture” (p. 148), a culture that frequently engages in the linguistic practice of utilizing the word for the intentions of recontextualization. Patti Smith found herself at the center of such a

dilemma upon the 1978 release of her album *Easter*, which contained the aforementioned track “Rock N Roll Nigger.”

According to a review of the song from media database AMG.com, Smith, who declared in the liner notes of the album that “nigger never invented for no color”:

[S]eemed to be using the word in the sometimes horrific way it is sometimes used between African-Americans (though practically never by whites), and she followed this in the song lyrics, in which people she appeared to admire – Jimi Hendrix, Jesus Christ, Jackson Pollock, and “Grandma, too!” – were called ‘nigger’ admiringly. (Ruhmann, n.d., para. 1)

Although some music critics and fans in the current day and age may have a more sympathetic understanding of her intentions given the expanded cultural debate about the word’s propriety/impropriety (i.e. – who can and cannot say it, how it can and cannot be used, etc.), Smith, at the time, did not escape unscathed from her artistic actions, as criticism from a *Rolling Stone* review displays:

Though Smith’s contention that Jackson Pollock was a “nigger” (presumably in his dealings with wealthy art patrons) is amusing, her attempt to make the word respectable is foredoomed. “Rock N Roll Nigger” is an unpalatable chant because Smith doesn’t understand the word’s connotation, which is not outlawry but a particularly vicious kind of subjugation and humiliation that’s antiethical to her motive. (Marsh, 1978, p. 64)

LaGrone (2000), perhaps drawing upon Ralph Ellison’s (1970) previously-mentioned quote as a reference, might be one of those doubtful about the potential of *nigger* to represent anything other than its traditionally pejorative connotation when it is placed within the context of hip-hop culture (no matter who is using it), stating that “self defined ‘Niggers’ embod[y] the un-American, undesirable ‘other’” (p. 124), who thus validate racist white assumptions of blacks as socially and culturally inferior. Also echoing some skepticism (if not outright skepticism) about the capability of individuals transforming the word to

represent anything positive – even in the alteration of the word’s spelling to *nigga* – is Asim (2007), who states that:

The logic behind the new spelling breaks down further when one recalls that racist whites have used “nigga” nearly as often as they’ve used “nigger.” To accept the validity of “nigga,” we’d have to forget those lovely “nigga songsters” that used to grace the music parlors of respectable white families in nineteenth-century America. We would also have to wink at all those segregationist senators – [Jesse] Helms, [Strom] Thurmond, [John] Stennis, et al. – who used to insist that “Negro” sounded just like “nigga” when pronounced with a Southern accent (p. 224).

Asim also goes on to declare the following about how some blacks have taken to using the word with transformative intentions:

I suppose there’s nothing wrong with attempting, however erratically, to transform a word that has so long demeaned us. What’s more troubling is the lack of imagination such attempts seem to suggest. Our slave ancestors made the most of limited means when they prepared meals from pork entrails deemed inedible by whites they served; now, in the twenty-first century, to subsist on our former master’s cast-off language – even in the name of revising it – strikes me as the opposite of resourcefulness. Our modern vocabularies, unlike the empty larders of slaves, are well stocked. (p. 231)

The ambivalence over the word’s place inside and outside of black music – if neither the complete acceptance nor complete rejection of it – was conveyed by rap group A Tribe Called Quest in their 1993 song “Sucka Nigga,” which described how some quarters of hip-hop and the black community wrestle with the pejorative history of *nigger*, even as these same artists and fans are occasionally prone to uttering the word in casual conversation and/or song:

See, nigga first was used back in the deep South
Fallin’ out between the dome of the white man’s mouth
It means that we will never grow, you know the word, dummy
Other niggas in the community think it’s crummy
But I don’t, neither does the youth ‘cause we
Embrace adversity it goes right with the race
And, being that we use it as a term of endearment
Niggas start to bug to the dome is where the fear went
Now the little shorties say it all of the time
And a whole bunch of niggas throw the word in they rhyme

Yo, I start to flinch, as I try not to say it
But my lips is like the oowop as I start to spray it...

Two decades earlier, proto-rap group/spoken word artists The Last Poets meditated on the connotation of the word with their 1970 song, “Niggers Are Scared of Revolution,” taking constructive aim at black Americans (or as they would refer to them, *niggers*) more interested in leisure pursuits (i.e. – patronizing American popular culture, sports, sex, etc.) than in political activism:

...But I’m a lover too, yes I’m a lover too
I love niggers, I love niggers, I love niggers

Because niggers are me
And I should only love that which is me
I love to see niggers go through changes
Love to see niggers act
Love to see niggers make them plays and shoot the shit

But there is one thing about niggers I do not love
Niggers are scared of revolution.

Comedian Chris Rock left little doubt about what he believed to be the differences between *black people* and *niggas* in a controversial routine from his 1996 HBO stand-up comedy special *Bring the Pain*. Declaring the former description to apply to responsible, hardworking individuals doing their best to uplift the conditions of black America, Rock laid into the latter as those willing to perpetuate indolence and ignorance within the black community. Although the routine clearly went over well at the time with his largely black Washington, DC concert audience, he has not repeated it in his comedy acts in the years since, later expressing reservations about how some racists may have misconstrued his intentions at what he believed to be a constructive, intra-demographic comedic commentary (see CBS.com, 2007, para. 25-28).

The following portion of his routine captures his humorous – yet undoubtedly real – frustration toward those blacks (or *niggas*, in his view) that he deems to be proudly wallowing in social irresponsibility:

There's some shit going on with black people right now. There's, like, a civil war going on with black people. And there two sides... there's black people, and there's niggas, and niggas have got to go. Every time black people want to have a good time, ignorant ass nigga fuck it up. Can't do shit, can't do shit without some ignorant ass nigga fucking it up. Can't do nothing, can't keep a disco open more than three weeks – grand opening, grand closing. Can't go to a movie the first week it comes out. Why? 'Cause niggas are shooting at the screen. What kind of ignorant shit is that? "Hey, this is a good movie, this is so good, I got to bust a cap in here." Hey, I love black people, but I hate niggas. Boy, I hate niggas.

In the years following federal legislative action that officially marked the end of legalized segregation/Jim Crow, the controversy over the word stretched out to one of the more iconic pieces of American literature (if not the most iconic), *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Featuring prominently the character of Nigger Jim and the use of *nigger* in the book over 200 times, Mark Twain's story is widely regarded as the quintessential American novel, found on the bookshelves of many American homes, libraries, and schools. However, the debate over whether the book is simply a timeless American literary work that champions racial respect (displayed by the book's theme of friendship between the slave character, Jim, and that of the white character, Huck) or is one that is racially insensitive due to the frequency of the word in the novel seemed to become more significant not only as the civil rights movement was gaining steam across the country, but was also significant after the passage of crucial civil rights legislation. As Alberti (1995) notes:

Although dismissed by some as an example of a newly faddish "political correctness," the controversy over the use of "nigger" in *Huckleberry Finn* goes back almost forty years and is in many ways a product of the efforts at school desegregation brought about by the civil rights movement and the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board Education*. The changing demographic and political realities created by these historical developments brought a new group of readers and

critics into formerly all-white institutions. For many black schoolchildren, the term “nigger” in *Huckleberry Finn* caused pain, anger, and humiliation, and led to organizations like the NAACP and other sympathetic parties to question the purpose of requiring children to read the work. (p. 920, italics in original)

Within the modern era in the realm of entertainment, the ongoing controversy over the word received significant attention in the aftermath of a widely-publicized November 2006 racial tirade by white actor/comedian Michael Richards at a Los Angeles comedy club. After being heckled by two African-American audience members during a stand-up comedy performance, Richards lashed out by repeatedly referring to one of the men as a *nigger*. An audience member’s video camera phone recorded the outburst, which was then posted on celebrity news/gossip website TMZ.com.

In the wake of the incident, Richards appeared on various media outlets to publicly apologize for his outburst, and African-American leaders such as Jesse Jackson and U.S. Representative Maxine Waters called for the entertainment industry – including rap musicians – to discontinue using the word. African-American comedian Paul Mooney, who frequently collaborated in the past with Richard Pryor and who has also made use of the word throughout his career, pledged to no longer use the term during his stand-up performances, effectively declaring that “[Richards] cured me” (Associated Press, 2006, para. 8). Additionally, Jackson contended that *nigger* is an “unprotected” word, and as such, is inapplicable to standards of free speech (para. 9).

For those doubtful about the capability of *nigger* to generally signify anything other than its commonly perceived meaning, they are also very likely to be doubtful about the ability of the word to take on a new meaning within the confines of the entertainment world in particular. This would likely be in agreement with Morley’s (2005) presumption that “the power of viewers to reinterpret meanings is hardly equivalent to the discursive power of

centralized media institutions to construct the texts which the viewer then interprets, and to imagine otherwise is simply foolish” (p. 175).

Such institutions, according to Hall (1990), are responsible “for the production, reproduction and transformation of ideologies” (p. 11), that “construct for us a definition of what *race* is... and what the ‘problem of race’ [to which the frequent utterance of *nigger* might apply] is understood to be” (p. 11, italics in original). Likewise, these same skeptical opponents of *nigger* might also be in agreement with Means Coleman (2002), who professes that in spite of whatever positive aspects there might lie in mediated texts, messages, and imagery deemed racially offensive to black identity, such negativity can ultimately trump any of the positive associations in the minds of viewers (especially white viewers), which could further serve to “communicate racial deviance and deficiency to the larger society” (p. 237). Applied to the debate about the potential – or lack thereof – of *nigger* conveying anything different from its traditional connotation within the realm of entertainment, it could be reasoned that in such a context, the word would meet an eventual fate similar to the example provided by Means Coleman.

Nonetheless, the debate continues as to whether or not the word can represent anything different from its traditional meanings. Given the status of the entertainment world as both a public and powerful site of struggle for this issue, it is of great importance here to comprehend the meaning of the word as it exists for certain individuals within the contexts of the *Chappelle’s Show* and general entertainment. Additionally, it would be equally vital to understand how the word can be open to interpretation within the context of everyday life. This study proceeds toward these ends by first performing a textual reading of the “The Nigger Family” skit (a skit in which the word is prominently featured), to be followed by an

audience analysis detailing how a select group of black individuals interpret the word, as it exists within all three of the aforementioned contexts.

CHAPTER III

BACKGROUND OF *CHAPPELLE'S SHOW*

The *Chappelle's Show* was a weekly-half hour sketch comedy show that premiered January 22, 2003 on the cable television channel Comedy Central, airing a total of 25 episodes over the course of two full seasons, in addition to three more episodes in an abbreviated third season. Created by comedian Dave Chappelle and his longtime writing partner Neal Brennan, the show featured both men along with an ensemble cast of comedic actors in a variety of skits satirizing subjects such as race, politics, celebrities, and popular culture.

Chappelle served as the show's emcee, discussing and introducing pre-recorded skits to a studio audience. Among the most famous sketches he performed in were the following: lampooning the drug-influenced, off-stage misogynistic antics of the late R&B singer Rick James (which featured Chappelle uttering the catchphrase, "I'm Rick James, bitch!"); portraying actor Samuel L. Jackson as a pitchman for a Samuel Adams-style beer brand; sending-up the trademark effusive vocal punctuations of rapper Lil' Jon; parodying R&B singer R. Kelly's alleged fetish for urinating on sexual partners; and playing a recurring crack-addled character named Tyrone Biggums, to name just only a few. Other noteworthy skits and recurring characters of the show included that of "Negrodamus," featuring a black Nostradamus-like soothsayer played by veteran comedian/writer Paul Mooney; "Charlie Murphy's True Hollywood Stories," in which Murphy (brother of actor/comedian Eddie

Murphy) related tales of his and his brother's off-camera escapades within the 1980's entertainment scene; spoofs of the PBS show *Frontline* (arguably the most famous of these being a mock documentary about a blind member of the Ku Klux Klan, unaware that he is actually African-American); and the 1950's-inspired television sitcom satire "The Nigger Family," which is the focus of this study.

Various celebrities such as Jamie Foxx, Wayne Brady, and Eddie Griffin made appearances in sketches; additionally, the show routinely featured previously recorded performances from well-known musicians near the conclusion of each episode, with Common, DMX, and Kanye West being among the many. From its launch in 2003 until the completion of its second season, the *Chappelle's Show* became one of the highest-rated shows on Comedy Central, earning three Emmy nominations along the way for its first season for Outstanding Directing for a Variety, Music, or Comedy Program; Outstanding Variety, Music, or Comedy Series; and for Outstanding Writing for a Variety, Music, or Comedy Program. Additionally, Chappelle received two NAACP Image Award nominations for Outstanding Actor in a Comedy Series for both the show's first and second season, along with the *Chappelle's Show* receiving Image Award nominations for Outstanding Variety Show (Series or Special) for its first season and for Outstanding Comedy Series for its second season.

The subsequent DVD releases of the first two complete seasons of the *Chappelle's Show* resulted in enormous public demand, with the first season becoming the best-selling television show DVD of all time upon its 2004 release, followed in 2005 by the second season's release breaking first-day and week-long sales records for TV DVDs. Many

popular culture critics were as equally enthusiastic about the show – and with Chappelle in particular – as was his audience, with *Time* magazine hailing him as “the most revered comedian among the youth of America, with a fresh, satiric take on race, sex and popular culture that’s often profane, sometimes profound, always provocative – and incredibly popular” (Farley, 2005, p. 70).

Slate.com perhaps paid the highest compliment possible to a comedy such as the *Chappelle’s Show* in 2004 by stating that “[i]f comedian Dave Chappelle’s eponymous show isn’t the funniest half-hour on television, it is only for the inconsistency from which all sketch comedy suffers” (Feeney, para. 1). Speaking to the show’s treatment on race that was evident in such skits as “The Nigger Family,” the online magazine also offered the following observation:

What *Chappelle’s Show* illustrates is that black-white relations, and the complex feelings that can accompany them – incomprehension, anger, guilt, fear, loathing – function like a hall of fun house mirrors. Once we enter (and we can’t not enter), we all end up as caricatures and distortions, not only in other people’s eyes, but in our own as well. This may not describe a multiracial society on the path to healing (though willingly participating in other people’s caricatures of us, for the higher goal of comedy, might be a postmodern substitute for the old liberal ideal of mutual understanding). But it does describe a society that – under the ministrations of someone like Dave Chappelle – is capable of generating a lot of extremely funny shit. (Feeney, para. 10)

With Chappelle having signed a development deal in 2004 with Comedy Central for over \$50 million (based largely on the success of the *Chappelle’s Show*), plans were underway for work to commence later that year on a third season when production problems resulted in the 2005 premiere being pushed back from a February date to May. By the time of the new season premiere date, continuing problems resulted in Chappelle halting production for good. He attributed creative differences with Comedy Central and resulting professional stress from the conflicts as reasons for ceasing work; within industry circles and

throughout the media, questions regarding Chappelle's mental state became frequent fodder for gossip (during this period, he retreated to South Africa and largely shied away from the public spotlight; he would go on to deny media stories alleging him to have been struggling with drug problems and mental instability at the time).

Completed sketches from the unfinished third season of the *Chappelle's Show* (comprising three episodes) premiered on Comedy Central in June 2006, with an accompanying DVD of the episodes (with bonus features included) released the following month – neither of which featured Chappelle as the host. As of July 2007, there were no new plans by Chappelle to resume work on the show, and although it has not officially been cancelled, Chappelle's continued differences with the network make it unlikely that new episodes of the show would be filmed in the near future, if ever. To date, Comedy Central continues to rerun previously-aired episodes of the *Chappelle's Show*. Additionally, the network's website continues to provide a link to the show, featuring a collection of its most-popular segments (http://www.comedycentral.com/shows/chappelles_show/index.jhtml).

Since the ceasing of production, Chappelle has publicly admitted to having become troubled by the manner in which the show's racial humor was being imitated – and consequently misconstrued – by its non-black audience. Appearing on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in February 2006, he discussed how one sketch in particular (filmed during the show's aborted third season) crystallized his concerns, where he was depicted as a pixie character in blackface, “a visual personification of the ‘N’ word” as he described it (Oprah.com, para. 2, “part 5 of 9”):

There was a good-spirited intention behind it.... So then when I'm on the set and we're finally taping the sketch, somebody on the set [who] was white laughed in such a way – I know the difference between people laughing with me and people laughing

at me – and it was the first time that I had gotten a laugh that I was uncomfortable with. (para. 3, “part 5 of 9”)

...That concerned me. I don’t want black people to be disappointed in me for putting that [message] out there.... It’s a complete moral dilemma. (para. 5, “part 5 of 9”)

In the wake of the show’s deactivation, Chappelle returned to his stand-up comedy roots in a series of performances across America. In March 2006, the Michel Gondry-directed documentary *Dave Chappelle’s Block Party* was released in theaters, featuring Chappelle as the host of a free, outdoor, all-star music concert held in September 2004 in the Brooklyn, New York neighborhood of Clinton Hill.

ANALYSIS OF “THE NIGGAR FAMILY” SKIT

With a running time of just over four minutes, “The Nigger Family” is an exercise of racially loaded humor that mines an entertainment terrain somewhere between linguistic subversion – for the purposes of providing social commentary through comedy – and utter political incorrectness – with the potential of eliciting some of the most cringing emotional reactions among socially sensitive media consumers. The skit, which runs in five acts and is opened and closed by a 1950’s-style sitcom jingle, contains a total of 26 references to the word “nigger” (not including those in the jingle and not including a mention of the word that follows the ending jingle), and is backed by continuously uproarious laughter from the *Chappelle’s Show* audience, which could easily serve as the hypothetical laugh track for the hypothetically popular weekly sitcom that “The Nigger Family” could be if it were in the present – or had once been during the so-called “Golden Age of Television” – a real-life show.

The skit is presented in a black-and-white style reminiscent of the 1950's era of pre-color television, and focuses on a day-in-the-life of the affluent "Niggar" family in their comfortable – and presumably all-white – neighborhood, consisting of the father (Mr. Niggar), the mother (Mrs. Niggar), and their son, Timmy. The family greets their television audience at both the start and conclusion of the skit's opening montage, waving to viewers while standing out on the front steps of their home. As the jingle (featuring the lyrics "N-I-G/G-A-R/It's the Niggar Family") is played over the montage, the television audience also sees Mr. and Mrs. Niggar enthusiastically teaching their son how to ride a bicycle on the sidewalk outside of their house, Mr. Niggar heartedly greeting a neighbor from a distance, and Mrs. Niggar good-naturedly reminding Timmy not to forget his lunch box as he prepares for another day at school.

The skit follows the family from the time they have breakfast in the morning to later in the evening, when Mr. and Mrs. Niggar prepare to host a dinner party and when Timmy embarks on his first big date with a schoolmate. In between, the family's name becomes the focus of double-entendre jokes evoking various stereotypes and disparagements that have long been directed at persons of African descent.

The sections that follow provide an act-by-act breakdown of the skit, focusing on specific instances in which the family's name becomes the target of Chappelle's brand of racially charged humor.

Act I

The skit begins in the family kitchen, where Mrs. Niggar announces to her husband that breakfast is ready, after which Mr. Niggar shows her a picture of a relative's son that has arrived in the mail. As Mrs. Niggar marvels at the baby picture, she remarks that the

newborn has “those Nigger lips.” Soon after, when Mrs. Nigger tells her husband that Timmy has still not woken up for breakfast, Mr. Nigger remarks that their son “sure is one lazy Nigger.”

The application of the last name “Nigger” to traits supposedly indicative of the family, such as their facial features (i.e. – Nigger lips) and laziness (i.e. – Timmy being a lazy Nigger) are clearly a play on racial/racist stereotypes that have been attributed to actual blacks for generations. The former reference to these stereotypes is the crude depiction of African facial features within arts and popular culture that abounded both during and some time after European colonialization and American slavery, such as the exaggeration of lips found in illustrations, advertisements, handbills and collectible items. Regarding the latter comment of Timmy being “one lazy Nigger,” it is a thinly veiled reference to another famous black stereotype, that of blacks lacking any kind of work motivation or intelligence necessary to develop such an ethic.

Manifested in the image of the black person as a *coon* in early American entertainment, such presumably racially inherent sloth was stereotypically used to denigrate blacks as “unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures” (Bogle, 2001, p. 8) who were probably “good for nothing more than eating watermelon, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language” (Bogle, 2001, p. 8). Carmichael & Hamilton (1967) argued that such stereotypes of blacks (especially those of black men) were able to persist – in addition to blacks being regarded in real-life as “‘apathetic,’ ‘dumb,’ [and] ‘shiftless’” (p. 36) – for the purposes of vilification, “in order to justify their continued oppression” (p. 36). Considering these observations in conjunction with the “lazy Nigger” remark, along with those pertaining to the family’s facial traits (i.e. – those “Nigger lips”), Chappelle’s

subversion of these racial/racist refrains is perhaps better understood, particularly for those unfamiliar with such refrains.

Act II

The skit transitions to the home of Jenny, the classmate whom Timmy is planning to take out on a date later that evening. When Jenny's mother informs her husband that "Jenny has a date tonight with the Nigger boy from school," the father's reaction of "Oh God, no!" humorously captures his underlying racism and subsequent horror over the thought that his precious daughter is dating a black boy.

After Jenny reassures her father that she is not going out with a "nigger" per se but rather her classmate, Timmy Nigger, her father's horror first gives way to relief and then delight over the boy:

Oh, of course, I like that Nigger! He's a very good athlete and so well-spoken, that family is going places. I mean we're rich, they're Nigger rich!

As the reference of "good Nigger" is used to describe Timmy as one who not only is a talented athlete but who is also very articulate, it can quite obviously be a flattering compliment to the physical and verbal attributes of this clean-cut white character. When applied to a black person – specifically, when directed toward a black person in the apparently derisive sense of "nigger" – and when looked upon in the absence of comedic irony, such flattery could easily be interpreted as condescension, especially considering the prevalence of the stereotype of blacks being athletically inclined but perhaps intellectually – and therefore linguistically – challenged.

Hall (2001) is among those who has commented on such an association in the minds of many, stating that "[t]he stereotype of the 'dumb Black' rationalizes the ability of African

American men to run faster and longer and jump higher than their European American counterparts as attributed to anatomy and/or genes” (p. 109). This association, which always fails to account for the myriad historical lack of scientific proof between race and intelligence, is nonetheless placed in an ironic (and subsequently humorous) context when it is attributed to the presumably gifted white character of Timmy Nigger, who by virtue of his race would probably never have to answer any such questions as it would pertain to himself, regardless of him being a real-life character or not.

The utterance of “Nigger rich” (i.e. – a play on the more racially loaded categorization “nigger rich”) as a compliment to Timmy Nigger simultaneously serves as a real-life slur towards black people in its inversely more well-known form, a distinction undoubtedly not lost on many a *Chappelle’s Show* viewer well-versed on the various racial slanders commonly directed toward blacks. “Nigger rich,” which is defined by the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University as one who is “deeply in debt but ostentatious” (Pilgrim & Middleton, 2001, para. 4, def. 9), is traditionally used in a manner quite different to the complimentary “Nigger rich” of the skit; there, the traditionally pejorative use of the term is flipped so as to signal admiration amongst the Niggers’ white neighbors regarding the family’s affluent social status. However, it is also designed to leave little doubt among viewers as to the real-life derogatory nature of the reference, which is placed upon the Niggers as a racially ironic punchline. Combined with the previously aforementioned reference of the athletic, well-spoken “Nigger,” the intent of this act’s linguistic subversion is made clear.

Act III

“Niggars” and Pork

The scene transitions back to the Niggars household during breakfast, where the family is greeted in their kitchen by the arrival of Clifton, a black milkman (played by Chappelle) who has come by to make a delivery. Clifton’s cheerful greeting of “Morning, Niggars!” is returned in-kind by the family themselves, with Mr. Niggars’s reply of “Why, it’s our colored milkman Clifton!” Not to be outdone on the thinly veiled racial humor at play in their greetings, Clifton replies, “And it’s my favorite family to deliver milk to, the Niggars,” another racially loaded response that becomes clearly evident from the robust laughter of Chappelle’s real-life studio audience.

When Clifton excitedly reacts to the smell of bacon wafting throughout the Niggars’ kitchen, he replies that “[s]omething sho’ smells good, you Niggars cookin’?!” After Mrs. Niggars tells Clifton that he is welcome to help himself to some leftover bacon on the breakfast table, Clifton genially declines, stating that he “knows better than to get between a Niggars and their pork,” because he “might get his fingers bit.”

The reference of knowing better than to come between a “Niggars and their pork” calls to mind the stereotype of blacks as rampant purveyors of greasy foods, among those being fried chicken and a wide variety of pork products, a stereotype that has long been used derisively against blacks, especially when applied to the image of the black as the good-for-nothing *coon* previously described in Bogle’s (2001) quote. As stated by Dormon (1988), many of the early American *coon* songs were, in some ways, extensions of that prototypical *coon*, namely that “[b]y way of continuity with the older minstrel image [that portrayed blacks as happy-go-lucky dimwits], coon songs naturally featured the watermelon- and

chicken-loving rural buffoon” (p. 455). His citation of lyrics to the 1899 Elmer Bowman song “I’ve Got Chicken on the Brain” demonstrates the image of black people as fervent lovers of pork and fried chicken:

There’s coons ‘round town, they ain’t hard to find,
Would rather have a poke (pork) chop than have their right mind;
But I likes my chicken, and I likes ‘em fried.... (as cited by Dormon, p. 456)

The stereotypical association between black people and pork that Chappelle emphasizes can also be understood within the context of de Garine’s (2001) analysis of food and cultural stereotypes. de Garine offers the following observation regarding such negative associations:

Prejudice and stereotypes relating to food habits operate in a much harsher way within the framework of a society: here social groups are competing. Food habits can therefore be considered as playing a stronger part as a social marker than as a cultural marker. They underline basic differences and even barriers between social classes. They reinforce stereotypes grounded on a variety of criteria: birth, wealth, education, ability and even intelligence. (p. 497)

de Garine goes on to apply the observation to the stereotypical existence of black persons’ food habits, particularly of blacks in the southern United States (where more blacks had resided before massive migrations to northern and western cities and states in the early 20th century), stating that in the South “where the blacks and the poor whites are economic competitors, the blacks can be distinguished by their consumption of a number of foods considered to be disgusting by the lower white socio-economic strata” (p. 497). Citing the literature of Whitehead (1984), de Garine second-hand references these negatively associated foods to be:

[P]ork products such as neckbones, fat back, feet, ears and tails, [in addition to] chicken necks, giblets and backs, black-eyed peas and dried beans. They are occasionally consumed by the lower white economic group but they consider them as black people’s food – ‘niggers’ food” (Whitehead, 1984, pp. 115-116; also cited by

de Garine, 2001, p. 497).

With the existence of such stereotypical associations of blacks and pork products both in and out of the American popular culture consciousness, the blatant racial irony to Chappelle's comment of not getting "between a Niggars and their pork" is quite apparent. The Niggars may be white, but the tongue-in-cheek nature of Chappelle's reference is obvious to anyone familiar with the real-life stereotypes of blacks as rabid pork connoisseurs.

The Forgetful "Niggars"

After giving Mrs. Niggars the family's weekly milk delivery, Clifton hesitantly informs them that they had not paid their bill from the previous week, telling them that he "knows how forgetful you Niggars are when it comes to paying bills." Mr. Niggars good-naturedly responds by saying that it must have slipped his mind, promptly paying Clifton and offering his apologies for the oversight, whereby Clifton cheerfully dismisses any potential inconvenience by responding "Oh Niggars please, Niggars please!"

The reference of the Niggars being forgetful, or late, with paying their milk bill can also be seen as an allusion to the stereotype regarding black people's knack for being tardy with all sorts of duties and obligations. This stereotype can be summed up in an observation made by Akil (2004), who writes that "[t]here is the perception, held by many, that Black people... as individuals are not punctual, in general" (para. 1, "Number 2:..."). Further commenting that lateness is a problem affecting everyone, not just blacks in particular, Akil notes that such a stereotype "hurts Black communities in numerous ways" (para. 1, "Number 2:..."), and that like all stereotypes attributed to blacks, believes that "many Blacks have accepted, processed, internalized, and now proselytize the verbiage of shameful stereotypical statements not as fiction, but as fact" (para. 4, Introduction section).

While it is not known whether someone like Akil would agree with Chappelle's skit (as well as the "lateness" comment), there can be no denying the line-toeing between commentary and political incorrectness by which Chappelle situates this stereotype when applying it to the white "Niggars." Regarding this stereotype, whether or not Chappelle ultimately attempts to be either a social critic in the vein of Akil or one who immerses himself in political/racial incorrectness for entertainment's sake is, perhaps, beside the point. Rather, it is probably better to understand his willingness to highlight this stereotype within the overall context of the skit, whereby he potentially – albeit not overtly – implores viewers to think about this stereotype (as well as the application of this stereotype to a white family with the last name of "Niggar") and think about why it is that some of them might associate black individuals with a lack of punctuality, rather than flat-out telling viewers that the stereotypical associations evoked in the skit are wrong, let alone instructing them on why they are wrong.

The use of "Niggar, please" by the Chappelle character also seems to be an apparent take on "Nigger, please," a racially informed saying that has been popular among some black persons as a way of expressing incredulity over various matters – big and small, meaningful and trivial – deemed, by those privy to hearing it, as being too inconsequential to be taken with much seriousness or believability. In many instances, it is used as a joking, good-natured dismissal, but it could also be used in a more emphatic way if a situation were to call for it.

Within popular culture, the refrain has specifically gotten mileage by its use in rap music. In 1999, the late rapper Ol' Dirty Bastard borrowed it for the title of his critically-acclaimed album, *Nigga Please*; on the album cover, the title was displayed as *N***a*,

Please. Over a decade earlier, pioneering hip-hop star Biz Markie put the saying to use in his 1988 song, “The Vapors,” where in one lyric he uttered the line, “Nigger, please/You work for U.P.S.”

It can be reasonably reckoned that a character such as Mr. Nigger – who seems to exist in a societal bubble apart from the day-to-day existence of blacks – would have about as much knowledge of the signifying “Nigger, please” refrain as he does regarding the racial irony of his last name. Indeed, the thought of him even uttering such a refrain – in a racially aware or non-racial sense – would (indirectly) seem to make the premise of the skit either that much more hilarious or offensive, depending on how a viewer interprets it. However one regards the use of this particular refrain in the skit, it seems to undoubtedly add more ammunition to the racial subversion at hand within “The Nigger Family.”

“Peace, Nigger!”

With the time having come to depart from the Niggers’ home (where Clifton refers to Mr. Nigger as “Mr. N-Word” after exchanging farewell pleasantries with him), Clifton leaves by saying “Peace, Nigger!” to Mr. Nigger. After a few seconds, Clifton surprisingly jumps back into the kitchen by yelling out “Niggers,” before scurrying out of the house for good.

By the end of this act, it becomes clear that Clifton – who with his jovial disposition and non-standard use of the English language (example: his pronunciation of the word *sure* as *sho*) seems to be a take on characters of old comedies such as *Amos ‘N Andy* – is not only aware of the ironic nature of the Niggers’ last name, but relishes the opportunity of making fun of it at the expense of the unaware white family. Hence, his reference to Mr. Nigger as “Mr. N-Word,” his parting remark of “Peace, Niggers,” and his “Niggers!” outburst that marks his departure from the family home.

The remark of “Peace, Niggars” can also be understood within the context of a salutation such as “Peace out, my nigger” that some blacks use with each other as a term of endearment marking the parting of each other’s company. “Peace out” has been a refrain long uttered in the albums of various hip-hop artists, and has also gained popularity among many others in real-life. The ways in which many rap artists, rap music fans, and others in general have transformed *nigger* into a term of endearment can also be used in conjunction with the “peace out” refrain to constitute that of “Peace out, my nigger.”

The knowing irony by which Clifton applies *nigger* to Mr. Nigger becomes apparent here in his reference to him as “Mr. N-Word,” calling to mind how many people, who are too uncomfortable with the word to even say it in a non-racist application, choose instead to refer to it as the *n-word*. The irony becomes especially clear at the end of the skit, when Clifton unexpectedly, clownishly, and for no-good reason other than to bring the irony home to television audiences, leaps back into the kitchen and yells out “Niggars,” before running back out of the home.

The manner by which Clifton pokes fun at the Niggars’ racially-ironic (and perhaps, unfortunate) name continues into the fourth act. In the process in both of these acts, viewers are treated to an old style of comedy that is based upon the utterance of cloaked verbal insults, a practice that is better known as signifying.

Clifton and the Art of Signifying

Clearly endowed with the ability to see through all of the racial double entendres and ironies that is the Niggars’ name, and which the Niggars seem incapable of parsing out for themselves, the character of Clifton represents a black comic tradition of obliquely ribald joke storytelling that is signifying. Different from the primary English meaning of signifying

(a.k.a. – to *signify*, or to *tell*, to *note something*), the term in its comedic incarnation takes on a particularly racialized meaning, in that it represents a “good-natured needling or goading especially among urban blacks by means of indirect gibes and clever often preposterous put-downs” (Merriam-Webster Online, n.d., noun, def. 1). Commenting on the African-American version of signifying, Abrahams (1970) stated that:

Signifying seems to be a [black] term, in use if not in origin. It can mean any number of things; in the case of the toast about the signifying monkey, it certainly refers to the trickster’s ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. It can mean making fun of a person or situation. Also it can denote speaking with the hands and eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures. Thus it is signifying to stir up a fight between neighbors by telling stories; it is signifying to make fun of a policeman by parodying his motions behind his back; it is signifying to ask for a piece of cake by saying, “My brother needs a piece of cake.” (pp. 51-52; also cited by Gates, 1988, p. 54)

The roots of signifying can be traced to the trickster figures found in the numerous folklore of sub-Saharan Africa and African America – the latter perhaps most notably represented by the character of the Signifying Monkey, which has been part of a wide array of African-American literature and tales for generations. Gates (1988) regards the Signifying Monkey as an extension/progeny of the Esu-Elegbara, a trickster character in the mythology of the Yoruba culture of western Africa, which would later be adapted into other versions for storytelling throughout sub-Saharan Africa and the New World, surviving the Middle Passage period of slavery that marked the forced transition of enslaved Africans from their continent to the Americas. He documents the following about its evolution into black American popular culture:

Tales of the Signifying Monkey seem to have had their origins in slavery. Hundreds of these have been recorded since the early twentieth century. In black music, Jazz Gillum, Count Basie, Oscar Peterson, the Big Three Trio, Oscar Brown, Jr., Little Willie Dixon, Snatch and the Poontangs, Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, Smokey Joe

Whitfield, and Johnny Otis – among others – have recorded songs about either the Signifying Monkey or, simply, Signifyin(g). (p. 51)

As an anthropomorphic character who gets his comeuppance on the powers-that-be in his storyworld environment, (“[t]he ironic reversal of a received racist image of the black as simianlike...., he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping [i.e. – playing on words/language], ever embodying the ambiguities of language....,” as stated by Gates, 1988, p. 52), the Signifying Monkey, according to Gates (1988), operates by the following mode of survival in his trickster universe:

The action represented in Monkey tales turns upon the action of three stock characters – the Monkey, the Lion, and the Elephant – who are bound together in a trinary relationship. The Monkey – a trickster figure... who is full of guile, who tells lies [*lies*, in this instance, being defined as “a traditional Afro-American word for figurative discourse, tales, or stories,” p. 56], and who is a rhetorical genius – is intent on demystifying the Lion’s self-imposed status as the King of the Jungle. The Monkey, clearly, is no match for the Lion’s physical prowess; the Elephant is, however. The Monkey’s task, then, is to trick the Lion into tangling with the Elephant, who is the true King of the Jungle for everyone else in the animal kingdom. This the Monkey does with a rhetorical trick, a trick of mediation. Indeed, the Monkey is a term of (anti)mediation, as are all trickster figures, between two forces he seeks to oppose for his own contentious purposes, and then to reconcile.

The Monkey’s trick of mediation – or, more properly, antimEDIATION – is a play on language use. He succeeds in reversing the Lion’s status by supposedly repeating a series of insults purportedly uttered by the Elephant about the Lion’s closest relatives (his wife, his “mama,” his “grandmama, too!”). These intimations of sexual use, abuse, and violation constitute one well-known and commonly used mode of Signifyin(g) [a.k.a. – “the dozens”]. (p. 56)

The savvy comic nature of the Monkey, namely his ability to get the best of the all-powerful Lion, has – according to Gates (1988) – served well in this character establishing a niche for itself in African-American lore, subsequently influencing the ritual of the “dozens” that is quite prominent in the culture:

The Monkey is a hero of black myth, a sign of the triumph of wit and reason, his language of Signifyin(g) standing as the linguistic sign of the ultimate triumph of self-consciously formal language use. The black person’s capacity to create this rich

poetry and to derive from these rituals a complex attitude toward attempts at domination, which can be transcended in and through language, is a sign of their originality, of their extreme consciousness of the metaphysical. (p. 77)

As a black milkman who works and lives in a 1950's-style (read: Jim Crow) universe, the character of Clifton in "The Nigger Family" is – safe to say – of no equal social, economic, political, and legal standing to that of the well-off white Niggers and their neighbors. Consequently, the character of Clifton is one that would most certainly be prone to encountering unpleasant experiences – both on the job and off – that would go along with being black in a (presumably) less tolerant period of American history, as well as in the post-Civil Rights era that is light years away (in time if not in attitude) from "The Nigger Family." Among some of his possible on-the-job experiences could be that of being the direct or indirect target of frequently-uttered racist remarks from customers on his milk route, his white fellow employees, and white supervisors; being passed over for promotions and salary raises based on covert or overt racial reasons; and to being singled-out as the blame for any and all workplace problems that occur at his less-than-racially enlightened place of employment, problems of which he might have neither created nor had any hand in enabling. This would possibly go along with the usual laundry list of outside-the-job racist inconveniences that comes with the territory of being black in America, such as racial discrimination from various service industries (be it financial, housing, recreational, etc.), having to endure occasional racial insults from various narrow-minded types in all sorts of places, being followed around in shopping centers and other establishments for no good reason other than skin color, and being pulled over by law enforcement for the same reasons while driving in upscale neighborhoods – not to mention a whole host of other unpleasant experiences, all too much to mention here.

If such inconveniences and social discomforts – all of them being race-based/racially motivated – are of a great possibility to be experienced by a character like Clifton within his textual environment (in a non-audience-viewed environment that exists outside of the four-plus minute running time of “The Nigger Family” skit), it becomes quite clear as to how he would likely be a figure running parallel to that of the underdog Signifying Monkey. Existing at the margins of a society/televised universe similar to the place of the monkey within the jungle, Clifton knowingly (perhaps better in some instances than in others) utilizes the Niggers’ name in racially ironic and clever ways when commenting on their penchant for financial delinquency, their zest for pork products, and (as it will be discussed in the analysis of Act 4) their ability to receive great service in a restaurant beyond that of any other “Nigger”/nigger. With the other ways that he utilizes their name, such as with his refrains of “Nigger, please,” and “Peace, Nigger,” Clifton communicates to them in the style of many blacks who – in real life – have taken to using it as a term of endearment and/or good-natured insult.

By the manner in which he utters their name at them, Clifton seems to be removing the Niggers from the image perch of their comfortably suburban white-bread status, and is placing them on a nominally associative level of the *nigger*, the constantly victimized and degraded black person of traditionally lower socioeconomic standings, the perennial societal “outsider” who is accorded little-to-no cultural/human dignity and respect by the little-to-none racially tolerant white powers-that-be. The two contrasting images, that of the white Niggers and that of the socially-marginalized *nigger*, in effect become intertwined with each other, potentially proving difficult for viewers of “The Nigger Family” skit to make mental distinctions between the two. If this is the case, then Clifton has linguistically succeeded in

getting the best of the Niggars, the “kings” of his environment, achieving a racially ironic comedic domination over his unwitting foil. Although no equal substitute for being able to accomplish socio/economic/political/legal justice within his environment (and although the premise of the skit certainly cannot be expected to solidify such similar forms of justice in real life), the ability of Clifton to gain a foothold over whites in a particular relational dynamic between the races (i.e. – the victory of language) represents the triumph of self-conscious wit and reason previously described by Gates (1988), a victory that marks the essence of signifying and which makes the character an archetypical hero of this longstanding black comedic practice in the mold of the proverbial Monkey.

The basest sentiments of the Niggars regarding race in general – and black individuals in particular – are never truly revealed to viewers by the time of the skit’s conclusion, so the audience does not get the chance to find out the family’s real feelings about such big-picture questions as civil rights legislation and racial understanding, as well as such potentially personal issues like the possibility of a black family moving next door, or how Mr. and Mrs. Nigger would react to young Timmy taking a black girl out on a date instead of his classmate Jenny. However, considering all of the good cheer and courtesy that the Niggars extend to Clifton throughout the skit, it seems that the family is in possession of some degree of racial goodwill toward blacks, which does not necessarily appear to begin with and end at Clifton. Given this possibility, there may be viewers who would even hold some guilty reservations about having the good-natured and naïve Niggars in the crosshairs of their laughter – for Dave Chappelle and his writers could have just as easily made the family a completely unsympathetic, less racially-friendly one.

Nonetheless, it must also be contemplated that Chappelle has potentially envisioned this family – well-intentioned toward Clifton and other blacks as they may be – as being one that has purposefully chosen to make themselves unaware in many aspects of society’s problems regarding race and racism, which possibly would intentionally blind them to the many ways that their affluent white socioeconomic status is bolstered by the perpetuation of such problems. If this is true (and it must be emphasized that this is critical conjecture), then perhaps this is a good reason as to why Chappelle has sketched this kind of family as an ideal target for his racially ironic and signifying text, with Clifton – all-knowing about the problems of race/burdens of being black – being a character very much aware of the Niggars’ deliberate self-ignorance as to how their idyllic existence is enabled by an unjust class and race dividing societal structure. While Clifton may put on a jovial act in front of the family, and while he may put on the same kind of front around other white customers on his route, fellow white employees, and supervisors, perhaps it is only performed for the sake of “going along to get along” in the white-dominated world in which he operates, where signifying becomes a useful emotional resource at his disposal in obtaining a measure of equal stature (symbolic, if not real) to that of the life-charmed Niggars.

Regardless of the Niggars’ awareness of the large-scale issues of race and/or regardless of how much they are aware of the societal advantages accorded to them due in no small part to their skin color, the ways by which the family is shown to be totally blind to the racial ironies of their name are what makes them the perfect foil for Dave Chappelle’s brand of instigative critical humor, which is personified by the perpetually instigative character of Clifton calling to mind such ironies. As a singular sketch figure that is a part of Chappelle’s comedic resourcefulness, the character of Clifton represents an extension of the black

comedic tradition of signifying (that is immensely embodied by that of the Signifying Monkey), which is also a testament to Chappelle's adeptness in furthering the tradition by his creation of such a character.

Act IV

After the third act ends with the Niggars still enjoying breakfast in their kitchen, the skit shifts to the evening at a restaurant, where Timmy and Jenny are due to arrive for their date, and where a white maitre'd is shown informing restaurant patrons that their tables are ready and waiting. First calling out for another patron's party, the maitre'd then calls out for Timmy and his date with "Niggar, party of two; Niggar, party of two."

By coincidence, Clifton is at the restaurant and waiting for a table with his wife when he hears the remark. Indignant over what he believes to be a deliberate insult from the maitre'd, he lets him know that they did not have the right to be disrespected just because they are "colored." Right then, Timmy and his date arrive to claim their table, where they run into Clifton and his wife, immediately clearing up the misunderstanding. The following dialogue captures the humorous situation:

Clifton: Well, well, hello little Niggar. (*Speaking to his wife*) These were the Niggars that I was telling you about.

Clifton's wife (*speaking to Timmy*): Are you the nigger that broke the bottle over Ronnie's head at the dice game?

Clifton: No, not that "nigger"... the Niggar from work, the milk route.

When Clifton's wife resolves her confusion, she wishes Timmy and his date well, to which Clifton remarks, "I'll bet you'll get the finest table a Niggar's (nigger) ever got in this restaurant." Both couples and the maitre'd share a good laugh over the remark as does the studio audience, and the act ends with Clifton declaring, "Oh Lord, this racism is killing me inside!" as a follow-up.

Clifton's wife's initial mix-up between the "Niggars" that he delivers milk to and the "nigger" who broke a bottle over the head of someone they knew is the first signal in this act of the racial double entendre quandary that is the Niggars' last name. She might not use the word *nigger* to favorably describe the bottle-wielding assailant in particular, but her casual use of *nigger* as a descriptor seems not to leave much doubt as to who/what she is thinking of: another black person. That Clifton said "No, not that 'nigger'" to relieve her confusion would also seem to confirm what kind of nigger/Niggar they are referring to.

When Clifton tells Timmy and Jenny that he bets that they will get "the finest table a Niggar's (nigger) ever got" in the restaurant, both he and his wife let out a big laugh that indicates the irony of that fact – in effect, saying that black people, prone to second-class treatment in all manners of social and leisure endeavors (which could include that of service at a quality restaurant), can expect to receive similar treatment at that restaurant in question, and that Timmy – the young white person with the phonetically and racially ironic last name of "Niggar" – is sure to get better service than the average black person would at that establishment. While the maitre'd seems to give an uncomfortable laugh that might show his knowledge of the irony (if not just only to give an indication of any racist attitudes that he may have), both Timmy and Jenny laugh heartily without any realization of it. This is completely brought home at the end of the act, with Clifton's declaration that "this racism is killing me inside."

Act V

The last act of the skit finds Mr. and Mrs. Niggar answering a ring at their front door, where they welcome in the first of their dinner party guests. When Mrs. Niggar asks the couple, who are Hispanic, if they are the "Wetbacks," the Hispanic man angrily replies that

their last name is not Wetback, but that “it’s Sanchez, and don’t call us ‘Wetbacks’ Niggars, we find it offensive!”

Mrs. Niggar’s insistence that the Hispanic husband-and-wife are the “Wetback” family, and the man’s retort of “Don’t call us Wetback, Niggars,” might resemble something of a hypothetically tense racial misunderstanding between a Hispanic and black person: specifically, a black person, perhaps not knowing that the term “wetback” is racially/ethnically offensive, being given a racially charged brushback by the insulted party. Undoubtedly, there are many people of various racial and ethnic backgrounds who can testify to being described in ancestrally unflattering terms by others unknowing of such insensitivity commonly existent in such descriptions, with some of those people perhaps being huge fans of the *Chappelle’s Show*. For anyone who has been on the receiving end of such unintended barbs in everyday life, this act (and the skit overall) can no doubt speak to such unfortunate occurrences.

After a few seconds of uncomfortable silence between the couples, the Hispanic man tells the Niggars that he is joking, that they are indeed the “Wetbacks.” The two couples then exchange a hearty laugh, with Mr. Niggar’s reply of “Wait ‘til we tell the Jews,” a probable reference to another family they know with a similarly racially/ethnically loaded last name. The act, and the skit, then concludes with Mrs. Niggar laughingly telling her husband that he’s “one crazy Niggar.”

The remark of “Wait ‘til we tell the Jews” denotes the complete racial absurdity of the skit’s premise, which is the dilemma of individuals having racially charged names that are plenty ripe for jokes. With Mrs. Niggar telling her husband that he’s “one crazy Niggar,” an indirect nod is made to the title of Richard Pryor’s classic 1974 comedy album *That*

Nigger's Crazy, a refrain that can subsequently be applied to describe a sort of wily, humorous, and sometimes vulgar black person with a proclivity for unique social observations and/or questionable mental sanity, a description that easily fit the life of someone like Pryor both on and off the stage – though it must be noted that like many uses of the word *nigger*, this refrain is certainly prone to questions as to whether or not it can be appropriately uttered and applied by anyone who is not black, even with the best of intentions. While Mr. Niggar's suburban sitcom-dad personage would undoubtedly be unsuited for the context in which the racially-evident “crazy nigger” saying is situated, it is the contradiction of applying such a refrain to someone like Mr. Niggar that allows for the racial irony of it to exist – and perhaps the humor, as well.

PREVIEW OF AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

If “The Niggar Family” was the only context used here to analyze the interpretations of individuals regarding the prevalence of the word *nigger*, this skit on its own would probably still bring forth some very interesting observations about the (in)appropriate use of racially loaded language. Nonetheless, in additionally analyzing media/popular culture in general as well as the context outside of entertainment (i.e. – everyday life), individuals can receive the opportunity to assess this word in extra dimensions, which could allow for a greater variety of observations to be discovered.

While this *Chappelle's Show* skit was the focal point of this study, it should also be thought of as a springboard to understanding participants' various sentiments regarding the word's definition in other ways as well. With this in mind, this study proceeds to present the

observations of interviewees not just in regards to the word's prevalence on the *Chappelle's Show*, but also their observations regarding the word's prevalence both inside and outside of the context of popular culture/entertainment.

CHAPTER IV

AUDIENCE ANALYSIS – METHODS

Sample

Between February and March 2007, ten in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals of black (or African) descent residing in Chicago, Illinois; Carrboro, Chapel Hill, Charlotte, and Raleigh, North Carolina; and New York, New York. Prior to conducting interviews, standards had been established as to what should be defined as “black” and “of African descent” in the recruitment of participants for this study. Individuals defined as being such by these categorizations were: 1) African-Americans, 2) persons of African descent who were non-American, 3) Latinos/Latinas – which included natives of America and residents of other countries – who possessed African ancestry, and 4) those persons of African descent who were of interracial/mixed-race heritage (ex. – where one parent of participant is identified as non-black).

Of the participants interviewed, nine were of the “African-American” distinction, with one other participant classified as “interracial.” The age of participants ranged from 20 to 57; nine participants were adults who had already graduated from college, and one participant – the youngest – was an undergraduate student in North Carolina. With the exception of the undergraduate student (who had been contacted on a social networking website) and a 26-year-old North Carolina resident (who was introduced through a mutual acquaintance), all other participants were personally known by the principal investigator.

Six interviews were conducted face-to-face with participants, occurring in Chicago, Carrboro, Chapel Hill, and Raleigh; the other four participants were interviewed by telephone, and were residents of Charlotte, Chicago, and New York City. While it was the initial intent of the principal investigator to have all interviews conducted face-to-face, scheduling conflicts between the principal investigator and two participants dictated that these particular interviews be conducted over the telephone. For the other two interviews conducted by telephone, these were done with participants recruited to replace two previously committed others, who were ultimately unable to be interviewed either in-person or over the telephone due to insurmountable scheduling conflicts. The following chart provides a breakdown of all ten participants.

Name of Participant	Age	Occupation	Residence	Date of Interview	Method of Interview	Location of Participant During Interview	Racial Classification
Andrea	26	Legal Clerk/Artist	Chicago, IL	2/16/07	Face-to-face	Chicago, IL	Interracial (African-American/Filipino)
Doug	29	Coffee Shop Barista/Rap Artist	Chapel Hill, NC	3/6/07	Face-to-face	Carrboro, NC	African-American
Eleanor	57	Public School Educator	Chicago, IL	3/19/07	Telephone	Chicago, IL	African-American
Jason	29	Interactive Media Specialist	New York, NY	3/18/07	Telephone	New York, NY	African-American
Miles	30	Financial Analyst	Charlotte, NC	3/16/07	Telephone	Charlotte, NC	African-American
Mitch	34	Sporting Goods Store Manager/Disc Jockey	Raleigh, NC	3/13/07	Face-to-face	Raleigh, NC	African-American
Phyllis	35	Nursing Student	Chicago, IL	2/14/07	Face-to-face	Chicago, IL	African-American
Sophie	20	College Student	Chapel Hill, NC	2/26/07	Face-to-face	Chapel Hill, NC	African-American
Stephanie	30	Event Planner	Chicago, IL	3/10/07	Telephone	Chicago, IL	African-American
Walt	26	Bartender	Chapel Hill, NC	2/20/07	Face-to-face	Chapel Hill, NC	African-American

Data Collection

All interviews were taped by the investigator with a digital voice recorder. These interviews ranged in time from nine to over 36 minutes for each participant, and were solely transcribed by the investigator. For the purposes of privacy, the real names of participants have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

The nature of qualitative research does not lend itself to assumptions/hypotheses about what kind of results are to be expected from a study. As such, this project relied on the grounded theory approach to compile and assess data, using the open, axial, and selective coding procedures taken from the framework of Strauss and Corbin (1998).

Open coding is defined as “the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions [of the concepts] are discovered in data” (p. 101). This procedure was used to break down the unedited, transcribed data into discrete parts, allowing for a close inspection of the similarities and differences emerging from the collected data that initiated the establishment of themes among the participants’ observations.

The fractured data was subsequently reassembled by the process of *axial coding*. It was under this coding procedure that common concepts were formed among the participant observations. Finally, the categories were refined and integrated with each other to form a theme by *selective coding*. It was during this process that all of the identified categories and subcategories were compiled under such a singular theme, from which a subsequent theory (or, as better referred to in the case of this study, a concept) regarding black respondents’ views of racially sensitive language was uncovered.

Limitations

The benefits to open-ended in-depth interviews are that they allow for participants to explain the rationale behind their motives and decisions. In the case of this project, the utilization of these types of interviews allowed for participants to explain the ways in which they interpreted the word *nigger* in a variety of contexts, what these interpretations meant for these individuals, and what these interpretations could potentially represent when considered on a collective level by the investigator. However, given the small number of participants used for this study, these observations (as previously noted) are not capable of being generalized to black audiences on the whole.

With this study, there is the question as to what would constitute an ideal number of participants to be interviewed. From the observations gathered here and which went into the findings, it seemed as though ten participants was a number suitable for making pertinent conclusions about how a group of black individuals might construct the word as it is prevalent across different contexts. It is quite possible that more than ten participants are needed to make such conclusions stronger, and perhaps more participants should be included for a potential expansion of this study in the future, or for the development of a different project similar to this one.

A quantitative survey might be useful for the generalization of results, allowing more participant data in the research process. The flipside of using this as a sole approach is that it does not allow for participants to express in their own words their true perceptions of the word *nigger*, whereas in-depth interviews can allow for such opinions to be revealed. To this end, this study could possibly benefit from a mixed-method approach of both in-depth interviews and surveys.

Arguably one of the most popular comedy shows of the '00s, the *Chappelle's Show* audience comprises an ample amount of non-black fans in addition to its black viewers. Although this study relies on the observations of black individuals, for any potential future studies that revisits this text, it would be of great interest to discover the observations of non-black individuals (i.e. – whites, Asians, non-black Latinos/Latinas, etc.) regarding their interpretations of the word as it is featured in the *Chappelle's Show*, throughout entertainment, and outside of entertainment (within everyday life). Such observations would be noteworthy, especially as they are analyzed alongside those of blacks for any sentiment similarities and/or contrasts. For any such future studies that use non-black participants for in-depth interviews, there is also the opportunity to use a mixed-method approach of both surveys and interviews, similar to what was proposed for potential additional studies with black participants.

With the qualitative approach, the use of other methods besides in-depth interviews, such as focus groups, should also be considered. The ways in which participants could be situated in groups – where participants could all watch the skit together before holding interviews – could be done by pairing them together based on being of the same race, establishing two or more different same-race groups along with one group consisting of persons of different races (or even a group consisting of individuals all classified as “interracial/mixed race”). Additionally, demographic categorizations such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and education can be used in conjunction with race in the pairing process. All of these ideas for future research are not only suggested, but are encouraged for expanding on what has been started here with this study.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS

Having used the grounded theory approach as a way of understanding how participants interpreted the word *nigger* in “The Nigger Family,” throughout entertainment, and in everyday life, this study did not begin with any indication as to what those observations would mean. This chapter is devoted to documenting those interpretations.

In conducting these interviews, one of the earliest discoveries that came about was the clear majority of people who liked the *Chappelle’s Show* skit, that being eight out of ten participants. Given this fact, the presentation of results might be better conveyed by organizing them into two major sections, with one detailing the sentiments of those who approved of the skit and the other detailing the sentiments of those who did not. As such, the presentation of observations in this chapter will be organized accordingly in that manner. Within these two sections (designated as “The Humor of ‘The Nigger Family’” and “The Offensiveness of ‘The Nigger Family’”), the observations of participants will also be highlighted in regards to how they view the word *nigger* throughout the general context of entertainment, as well as how they view the word in the context of everyday life, outside of entertainment.

The Humor of “The Nigger Family”

‘Nigger’ in the Context of the Chappelle’s Show Skit

By creating a satirical text in which a white family is given the name of “Nigger,” a phonetic correspondence to the historically racist insult of *nigger*, Chappelle and his cast were able to toy with racial irony for comedy’s sake – in effect, employing a method of subversive entertainment that calls to mind late comics/social critics like Richard Pryor and Lenny Bruce.

The way in which the word is deployed throughout the skit for the purposes of irony, in addition to the numerous times that the word is used, seems to fall along the lines of the previously-referred to “strategy of subversion through overuse” (Kennedy, 2002, p. 38) The idea that comedic subversion was at hand was overwhelmingly agreed upon by those who found the skit as humorous, which would prove that at least among several black media consumers, Chappelle’s intent was clearly well-received. Among those who saw the skit as a work of social commentary/critique was Andrea:

I knew that the intention of the skit was for it to be based in satire, and it was supposed to be kind of, like, holding up a mirror towards, I guess, the spectator or the viewer.

She goes on to further explain the skit’s social mirror-by way-of-comedy approach:

Well, I think his skit was incredibly witty in that he took a negative word and sort of applied it in an absurd way to a white family in a “Leave it to Beaver”-like skit... he’s using the term to essentially hold up a mirror to society and to call attention to glaring problems that he sees and that I see [and that] other black people see.

Miles similarly talked about the skit bringing forth longstanding societal associations of the word (traditionally regarded as being negative), and how such associations are humorously turned inside out within this particular entertainment context:

My first impression was one of hilarity. I thought it was quite funny, and that's one of the things that I like about Dave Chappelle, is that he takes issues that a lot of people either find offensive or take very seriously and makes light of them, and this is no different.

As a fan of both the skit and of Chappelle in general, he believes that the subversive hilarity of "The Nigger Family" is something that is not just for black fans of the *Chappelle's Show*, but which could be appreciated by many:

I really did enjoy the fact that he was taking something [i.e. – the word *nigger*] that bothered not only black people, but also some white people these days, and has turned it into something that we can all laugh at.

For many of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, it goes without saying that this word is a symbol of considerable consternation, perhaps too uncomfortable a word to be talked about, let alone spoken even with non-racist intent. This cannot be said for Miles, whose own lack of unease with the many uses of the word is further documented throughout the latter portions of this chapter. Within the context of "The Nigger Family" satire, he explains how the skit forces its viewers to deal with their own apprehensions in hearing the word, which in this instance is in one of his favorite television shows:

He's attacking these things that people want to be quiet about. He's being innovative, he's being a frontrunner, he's being right in your face, and that I have to applaud and have to adore.

For Miles, the skit operates in much the same fashion as does the rest of Chappelle's general comedic oeuvre in the area of race:

He's done it [i.e. – successfully subvert the symbolism of *nigger*] in such a fantastically creative way that you can't help but like the man, and in not only the use of the word "nigger," but all of his ideas. I mean, he takes what we could think is socially acceptable or what the norm is and he twists it and bends it and says, "Have you thought about it this way?"

Similar to Miles, others who liked the skit found it to be an extension of Chappelle's professional persona:

He takes advantage of racist or prejudiced feelings and puts them in front of the mass media so everybody can make fun of it. (Jason)

I think it was in good taste, in terms of, like, its job was to make us laugh and to sort of be like, “Damn, wow.” It’s shocking, I mean, that’s Dave Chappelle for one... he’s known for shocking a motherfucker. (Doug)

I thought it was funny... you know, initially, it was funny to me. And it was funny because I’m familiar with Dave Chappelle’s work, so I saw the humor in there. (Eleanor)

Other interviewees also commented on the skit’s linguistic subversion of *nigger*, as it relates to the notion of getting others to seriously think about possible alternate meanings of the word in everyday life. Mitch similarly believes in the ability of the word to unite people in laughter, stating that he knows *nigger* most definitely “can be used negatively, but it’s not really a negative term unless you make it negative.” Doug found similar comedic subversion at work in the skit:

That skit itself was no more than to break down every use of the word possible. I mean, it was every sort of typical way to use the word “nigger.”

Doug did express surprise over how someone could get away with creating such a skit for basic cable television, given the historically sensitive nature of the word and the rather relentless way in which it is used overall in the skit, stating that he “imagine[d] that someone did get offended and said some shitty comments [about it].” Out of all those who found the skit to be funny, Walt appeared to be the least impressed with it operating as a type of subversive social commentary. He remarks the following:

I didn’t think anything when I saw this skit, I just thought it was funny, I thought it was entertaining. And the word in it, I felt like that was tolerable, you know, I think it was okay.

Amidst the overall approval among participants for the humor of “The Nigger Family,” there were a couple of noteworthy reservations regarding the message of racial

irony in the skit. Doug admitted to having concerns about whether or not everyone viewing the skit – especially some white viewers – would completely understand the unremitting use of *nigger* as a means of creating subversively comedic commentary. He believed Chappelle to have displayed a lack of “responsibility” in this regard, even in spite of the comedian’s announcement to his audience before the airing of the skit as to the intent of it:

I think what’s lacking in his ability to use that word “nigger” is that he’s not bringing up the responsibility of the word, you know. He doesn’t sit back and say, “Yeah white people, I am a black, I have a television show, I am paid to entertain you. It ain’t okay for you to still say it. You’ve seen my skits, know that if someone black hears you from a distance saying the skit, they’re still going to get pissed, so don’t get your ass kicked thinking it’s okay to say the word, you know. I’m a paid professional, I can do this, it ain’t okay for you [to say the word].” And I think that’s what’s lacking, you know.

According to Doug, by the failure of Chappelle to address the responsibility of the word within the context of the skit, a problematic notion regarding the use of it may be promoted, particularly to those for whom the word’s symbolism has historically not applied to and/or affected on a racial level:

I think that show itself, it tells people it’s okay [to use the word] by not telling them that it’s not okay, you see what I’m saying? It’s like that unwritten rule, you know, like it’s only okay because someone didn’t say it was not okay, yeah. But if someone said it was not okay, then yeah, it’s not okay.

Doug, himself, does not take offense to hearing others (i.e. – non-blacks) use the word in this manner, as if they were relating a joke that they heard on a skit like “The Nigger Family.” He just believes that other blacks may not see it in the same way as he would, which he believes to be a troubling aspect of the skit, even though he found it to be hilarious overall:

I mean, me, personally, I’m not going to be offended, but somebody will be offended. From a distance, [say, for instance that] you’re a white dude, we’re white dudes sitting here, and we’re saying the word “nigger” all out loud because we heard it from the Dave Chappelle’s Show. [If] black folks come walking by, they’re like “What the

fuck are you all talking about over here, why do you think you've got to use that word and shit," [like it's] totally justified, you know, because they shouldn't be using it, you know. You get beat up, because you think it's okay, because you weren't told that it wasn't.

Andrea also believes that "The Nigger Family" walks a fine line between effective irony and political incorrectness. Nonetheless, it is a discomfort that she believes is successfully outweighed by the skit getting its message/purpose across to viewers:

I think that [the skit is] a strange but really effective way to shed some light on the n-word (i.e. – *nigger*) and its odd meanings, uses, and history... so, in a way the skit's kind of brilliant. Troublesome, but brilliant no less.

The last two responses of Doug and Andrea could typify a feeling among others (not including interview participants) who would enjoy the skit, but who still might have questions as to how the word can unequivocally be utilized effectively and appropriately within a particular context, such as the "The Nigger Family" itself. Relating to general entertainment beyond that of the *Chappelle's Show*, such questions abound even more. As shown in the following subsection, what a participant perceives as an effective and appropriate use of the word in one context ("The Nigger Family") is not necessarily guaranteed to similarly translate into another (entertainment in general).

The Prevalence of 'Nigger' Throughout Entertainment

The *Chappelle's Show* represents one entertainment setting by which a number of consumers (specifically in the case of this study, interview participants) might find utterance of the word *nigger* suitable, but what about their observations of the word within entertainment in general? This study attempted to uncover how interview participants/media consumers would regard such utilization of the word across a wider entertainment landscape, and in doing so, found the importance of genre and text to be crucial in dictating the perceptions of participants. In particular, genre and text importance (i.e. – the type of

entertainment genre, as well as entertainment texts and storylines) enabled for the discovery of ways by which participants viewed the word as either **appropriate** or **inappropriate** within the context of entertainment, two distinctions that can also be regarded as the creation of two separate themes. Although separate, a clear understanding of the themes (or, the various participant observations that went into the formation of the themes) might best be understood by presenting all participant observations together, rather than as different sections based on “appropriateness” and “inappropriateness.”

Observations

Concerning the widespread use of *nigger* in entertainment, there were definite distinctions among participants as to how the word can – and should – be used, the ideal genre for its use, as well as the particular person saying the word (i.e. – the racial/ethnic/cultural background of the person). Consequently, participants also commented on inappropriate usages of the word within this context, giving deliberation to those speaking it, the art form in which it used, and various other ways to which the word might be applied.

According to two participants, the genre of comedy might be more palatable than others when it comes to the word being employed:

I think it would only be a comedy that I would enjoy hearing the word “nigger.”
(Phyllis)

It’s a little more soothing... it’s definitely a little more easier to swallow with comedy than if it would be in, like, a drama. (Mitch)

Indeed, comedy might be an ideal forum in which this word can be frequently applied for the purpose of art. However, in the observations of some participants (and perhaps especially important for some modern-black comedians to understand, given how many have been prone to voraciously using it in their routines), the genius by which racially charged

comedy is judged does not necessarily have to depend on the word being constantly deployed in it. Mitch, who compares the misuse/overuse of *nigger* by entertainers to a similar misuse/overuse of the term *motherfucker*, remarks that “if there’s something funny and the term is thrown in it... that doesn’t necessarily make it funny.” He cites Richard Pryor as a specific example:

It all depends on the context really, on how it’s used. Like, Richard Pryor, he’s one of the most famous black comedians, he used that term religiously. Now thinking back, would he still be funny if he didn’t use the term? Yeah. But for some reason, I guess using that term made his comedy funny, especially because he was just usually talking about himself or, you know, family members or friends who were black.

In spite of his belief that the word is not necessarily needed to make one’s comedic routines funny, overall, the use of the word within entertainment does not seem to faze him, although he knows that others would have reasons to find it offensive:

You know, a lot of people might not think it’s funny using that in the mainstream like that all over television, but, me myself, I don’t see harm in it even though people maybe in their 40s, 50s, 60s, or 70s and [who] went through the Civil Rights movement, I can see where they can find it, you know, foul or no good, because they grew up with people calling them “niggers,” and not in a funny way at all, but in a derogatory way. So I can see where most people think it’s bad, but me myself, I don’t [see] any harm in it.

For some participants, the effective use of the word within entertainment is quite dependent on the way it is used for the sake of art, and perhaps not so much contingent on the genre in which it is used:

I think if popular culture, for example, or a show or a movie is trying to reflect urban black culture, I think that it may be realistic to use the n-word, because that is what is used in vernacular speech, that is how urban black people talk to each other in certain communities... not my friends, but in some [other] places. (Andrea)

Say, for instance, if there was a particular scene that, like in a theater, if you were doing a storyline that revolved around maybe, you know, slavery, or maybe something up to the Civil Rights [movement] and all that and everything, and it might have been thrown out by that white character because his role called for it, then no

[she would not be offended by the word]... I understand the purpose of the word.
(Eleanor)

Although there would appear to be comedic and non-comedic instances in which the word can be used, participants also expressed how the misuse of the word can cut across genres. Andrea, who noted how the word can be inoffensively deployed for comedic purposes, seems to believe that the reverse can occur as well:

To just be used carelessly in television and sitcoms, it's tricky. It requires a lot of thought.... But it can be misused and it can be overused, and it can be offensively used.

Others expressed how the word's use in genres outside of comedy can pose problems, and therefore may not be suitable given particular concerns:

What I don't like is when "nigger" is used in the context when the lyrical content [of rap songs] is violent, like "I'll shoot a nigger up,"-type shit, like "I'll shoot a nigger up, I'll kill a nigger." That's where I feel that ain't helping nobody. (Doug)

Don't like it in drama, I don't like it in rap music, don't like it in anything that's so public that it reaches a wide audience other than in comedy. (Phyllis)

Phyllis further explains why she does not care for the word in these particular instances, especially when it is in dramatic shows and rap music videos that benefit from widespread exposure:

Well, drama, rap music... it's just that most children go to bed before 10 o'clock, when they're still impressionable, when they might use it out of term. I think it would be the same way as cursing, that same as "S-H-I-T," or "motherf-er," where they may not know that you can't commonly use the word "nigger," just like you can't use "S-H-I-T," that they might not be supervised when they're seeing it, just like you're not supervised with the music that you hear, and with rap music, we see things coming out.... there's not enough supervision, not enough way to control the impressionism.

Artistic license (i.e. – the use of *nigger* for content/storyline purposes) and genres are not the only considerations taken into account when debating about the appropriate use of the word in entertainment, but also whose mouth(s) the word is coming out of as well.

Particularly when it comes to race, Eleanor expressed reservations about hearing the word used by whites, despite the fact that – given her opinion from earlier about the use of the word within a storyline which addresses racism – she might not be so much *opposed* to the word used in that matter as she would be admittedly uncomfortable in just generally hearing it being spoken by them:

It's just something about when a white person uses that word that seems to just conjure up all kinds of racial feelings. They may not even have that feeling [presumably racist feelings], but it's just something that I feel when a white person uses that and they're trying to use it [and say], "Well OK, ha ha, it's just comedy," I still have feelings that perhaps it may underlie some of their true feelings, and that they're hiding behind "Well this is just comedy and that's why I'm using it." So I don't feel comfortable at all when I hear a white person say that word, whether it's comedy or especially if it was just in ordinary language like I hear. Sometimes I will hear on those videos or something, one of the white rap stars or something like [them] try to use that word, you know. That annoys me, that gets to me, I still feel that there's some underlying prejudice there that they may or may not be aware of that they possess, but I think they do. I don't feel comfortable at all when I hear that word anymore, period, black or white. But if I hear it from a white person, no, I don't like it. I have real issues with that.

Eleanor further discusses her discomfort not just from hearing non-black entertainers use the word, but also in hearing some black entertainers use it as well (most notably comedians and rap artists):

Growing up, it didn't bother me, because that's what I was exposed to, just hearing that from black comedians, that's what I was exposed to. It was only when I got older and started seeing that comedy could be just as funny without using that word, like somebody like Sinbad and Bill Cosby, people who don't use that word in their skit, [and still] it's just funny. So it's that now, I feel that it's... I don't feel that it's needed anymore, and I think it's place was way back then when black comedians were working the Chitlin' Circuit, as my grandmother used to say.

I think we were getting away from that [i.e. – black people referring to each other as "nigger"], I think it was shifting away with the Civil Rights movement and the '60s and the '70s and everything. I think we were... we had gotten away from "nigger." Everything was like "brother," "my sister," and all of that. And I think with the... I have to say it, with the music of the '80s and the '90s, it just kind of went backwards, we regressed, we went back to a time in our history that was not a very - how can I put this - it was just an entrapment, you know. And when I think of that word

“nigger,” I just think of entrapment. And I blame, and I’m aging myself now, I blame a lot of these get-rich-quick black hip-hop stars for bringing that mentality back into this use. And so I’d like to see... a shift in some of the hip-hop stars, because young people are identifying with them a lot.

Miles also sees a distinction existing among many black media consumers between how they feel about white entertainers using the word (regardless of the genre specialty of the entertainer) and those who are black. However, it is a distinction that he does not necessarily buy into:

Just like we’re going to the movies and we come with our willing suspensions of disbelief, it’s the same concept that you do with all forms of entertainment. I am here [enjoying this entertainment] because this is a break from reality, I am here because this is to be entertaining to me. Now whoever’s entertaining, it usually does not matter. The subject matter, depending on your tastes, does not matter. So for me to have back-to-back comedians, say [for instance] Chappelle get up and then a white guy get up telling very similar jokes in a very similar vein [and] are using very similar language, I think should be okay. If I’m accepting of a black man making fun of some stereotypical tendencies that maybe a few black people or a few African people or a few African-American people may hold, then I should be just as comfortable with someone else making similar generalized observations. For me to say that it’s okay for one person to say it versus another and in the same context would be tantamount to ignorance on my part. So I would say, no. There is a distinction, but I don’t think there should be a distinction, especially if it’s used in the same context.

As for his patronizing of entertainment in which the word *nigger* is prevalent, he does not believe it to be a negative reflection on him as a person, let alone on his habits:

Every time I hear someone say something about a “nigger” or a “bitch” or a “ho” or something, it does not change something in my brain that says, “Now I need to start referring, or thinking of these other people that way.” No, it doesn’t do that for me, I’m a grown-ass man and I can decide what is right and what is wrong for myself. So what I find entertaining honestly has no reflection on my thought process, it’s simply a break from the norm.

From these observations, the appropriateness/inappropriateness by which *nigger* is used in various entertainment texts and genres are matters of individual choice, which suggests that just because several participants view the word as being suitable in one context (the *Chappelle’s Show* skit) does not mean that they will all agree on its suitability in another

context (entertainment in general). Considering the overall premise of social constructionism in regards to all of these participant observations, it could be understood how such a similarly reconstructed way of looking at the word amongst several individuals within the parameters of the *Chappelle's Show* skit brings with it different outlooks – and thus more individualized formations of the word – within the larger realm of entertainment.

The Prevalence of 'Nigger' Throughout Everyday Life

No less important of an objective than comprehending the interpretations of *Chappelle's Show* fans regarding the prevalence of the word *nigger* within entertainment, this study also sought to understand the ways by which interviewees construct meaning from the word within the context outside of entertainment (i.e. – everyday life). For those participants who enjoyed “The Nigger Family” but who offered up varying opinions about the word’s general presence in entertainment, observations regarding the word’s prevalence outside of that realm revealed likewise diverse opinions that overall did not unanimously correlate (for lack of a better qualitative term) with the favorable reactions to the skit. Just as usages based on **appropriateness** and **inappropriateness** were themes that emerged from the preceding entertainment topic, these themes similarly emerged amongst the participants regarding the application of the word in everyday life – although obviously, the types of use in these two contexts differ.

Observations

The manner by which many have linguistically attempted to transform the connotation of *nigger* not just throughout entertainment but in everyday life was highlighted earlier from the observations of various critical/cultural theorists. Consequently, it was also

of interest here in assessing the extent by which individuals either are or are not able to reappropriate the meaning of the word in general.

Observations from several participants particularly identified and championed the real-life, “subversive” use of the term as a method of turning something viewed as a traditional negative into that of something positive:

I still maintain the belief that, overall, it’s been turned into something positive when black people have reappropriated the term and started using it, themselves, to reflect one another. It’s become an incredibly subversive tactic, and I think that it’s worked brilliant in a way, so I wouldn’t want to discredit that, and I think that’s really smart, and it makes me happy to see it being kind of flipped on its head, if you will. The term, still for me, it’s one of those things that it’s just so crude and it just... you know, I guess, if you’re speaking the vernacular and you want to intensify the speech and you want to sound crass and vulgar, that’s definitely the way to do it. But, do I think it’s wrong to use the term, no. But I don’t think it should be overused to an extreme. (Andrea)

Like, me and my buddies in our circle, if the word slips or is said, it’s a term of endearment amongst black men, if you will. And when a black man says to me, “Hey nigger, what’s up,” I’m going to say, “Hey nigger, what’s up” back. And when I’m saying it to this black man or when he’s saying it to me, the thought does not cross my mind – it doesn’t even come to mind about any kind of negative connotation on the word. It’s not... I don’t think about slavery, I don’t think about white people and their use of the word, I don’t think about any of that. It’s almost the same as saying “brother” to me, and that is simply because of the time I grew up in, the people I grew up around, and the life that I’ve led. Now, you know, that may be different from somebody else, but hell, so is everything else. (Miles)

It’s as acceptable... it’s the same thing regardless of who’s saying it if they’re trying to say it as positive. But then, that brings the question, meaning, “How can it ever be positive?” But how could it ever be positive, I think, is answered in what it’s intended to do, right? If it’s intended to make some people laugh, sure. I mean, it doesn’t make everybody laugh, it might make some people laugh, and if that’s what it’s intended for, you know, fine, that’s fine. (Jason)

The last observation by Jason brings to mind questions of just who can say the word – in particular, if non-blacks (especially whites) can equally use the word as a non-racist, referential term of endearment. For some, such usage might be deemed safe, albeit with some degree of reservation and with consideration by the manner in which it is uttered:

It's embedded in use for it to be negative if it comes out of a white person's mouth. And so crossing that line between race and that word, it just isn't the best idea. But, honestly, white people use it... I could care less... if they're cool with me, then they're obviously not racist. (Walt)

I feel like they're as entitled to use it... this is a tough one to say, but they're as entitled to use it as other folks are at this point in time. They are as entitled to use it as a salutation as anybody else.... But black folks can use it as a slander; white folks cannot use it as a slander. (Jason)

Another participant who does not have a problem with non-black (read: white) friends referring to him as a *nigger* in this particular way is Mitch, though he notes that such friends of his do not do so out of trepidation. Nonetheless, he does see the existence of a double-standard in this area in general:

I don't want to say that it's okay for black persons to say it, but it's not okay for whites. But realistically, I guess it kind of is that way.

Among those who not only see a distinction between blacks and non-blacks using the word in everyday life but who unequivocally support such a distinction is Miles. In doing so, he brings this discussion back to the area of entertainment, delineating between his comfort in hearing a white person use it in that particular context and in that of everyday life:

There's definitely a distinction between white people and black people using that term in everyday life, and I think that there should be a distinction between black people and white people using that term in everyday life, yeah. And I say that because everyday life is not entertainment, everyday life is real life. Entertainment, again, we use entertainment in its various forms to get away from real life, or to take a break from it. And so we're, again, willing to walk into an entertaining situation willingly suspending our disbelief. [Referring to a hypothetically entertaining situation] I don't really believe that the magician is floating above the air, but, you know, for the sake of entertainment and a good time, I'm going to watch it and be amazed. That same situation with the use of the word "nigger," if I'm in a comedic situation, which is either/or a drama or someone showing me a film and telling a story and using the word, and this is, you know, a reflection of what the story's about, then I'm okay with that. But, going out and, you know, sitting on a bus and sitting next to a white guy and he turns next to me [and says], "Hey, what's up nigger," well I've got an issue with that, because that's everyday life now. We're not in an entertaining situation, and that is something [that] I don't think the white people in everyday life

have the right to share with black people. I don't think that they have earned that right, and I don't think that they ever will earn that right.

While Miles may not approve of whites saying the word in everyday life – even as a term of endearment – for reasons that may be historical (i.e. – the historically vindictive way in which the word has been deployed from the mouths of many ill-meaning whites), a participant like Walt interprets such a use of the word by the following:

I think it's awkward. I don't think it's any real reason to use it. It's not a part of their normal vocabulary, that's not the way that they talk when they're at home with their families.

As it was that some of these participants found the word to be problematic – and thus inappropriate – in certain ways within the everyday life context, there were also instances of people finding the word to be inappropriate no matter what the situation may be. Indeed, not only was this the case, but some participants talked about how they themselves do not use – let alone condone – the word at all as a real-life referential term:

It's still demeaning to me because of the history of the word... I don't like hearing that because that is not a, what can I say... it's not a respectful [term]. I don't think of it as being, "Hey my nigger, that's my friend." I know what it was, it used to be like that, but I think we've evolved enough that we don't have to use that term anymore, "my nigger." [What is wrong with saying], "My man, my brother"? We don't need [to say "nigger"] anymore. I think there's not a place in this day and age for that word to be used anymore. (Eleanor)

Truthfully, I don't like it being used. I can't say that I've never used it in my life. I have used it, but I don't like the history of the word, so I don't want to use the word myself. (Jason)

I think if someone has to use it, if someone has to use the word "nigger" in their everyday life, then that's them. I don't think it's really necessary for anybody to use it in everyday life, you know. Like, why would you need to use it? Like, just in conversation, I mean, depending on your... like [hypothetically speaking to someone], "Yo, man, that nigger jumped out the house, that shit was crazy. I was like 'Nigger, are you cool?'" That's one thing, but like, you know, I don't have to use it. I'm not surrounded by a bunch of "niggers," you know. I have no reason to use the word at all like everyone else that I know. (Doug)

From the observations of participants, when it comes to context, the appropriateness/inappropriateness by which the word's prevalence is judged outside of entertainment is given just as much consideration as the word's prevalence inside of that realm. Participants had taken into account varying standards by which they judge the word, which constitutes neither unanimous nor predominate agreement among all who found "The Nigger Family" to be funny. Relating these observations to the concept of social constructionism, those who declared "The Nigger Family" as hilarious – and who thereby were all willing to look at the word in that context in a manner different from its traditionally pejorative meaning – do so as they construct their own definitions of the word on a level both different from the skit and entertainment in general – this level being that which exists outside of entertainment, that of everyday life.

The Offensiveness of "The Nigger Family"

In spite of the favorable reaction that "The Nigger Family" largely received from interviewees, two participants of this project gave outlying opinions regarding not just the skit in its totality, but the presence of the word within the skit in particular. Additionally (and perhaps not surprisingly), their sentiments revealed them to be just as unenthusiastic about the prevalence of the word both throughout and outside of entertainment.

What proved troubling to Sophie about "The Nigger Family" was the constant use of *nigger*, the novelty of which seemed to wear off as the skit progressed:

I thought it was funny at first. But then, when he was using it over and over and over, then it sort of got more serious than the beginning.

She explained that such utilization of the word mirrors the manner in which many are given to frequently using it in everyday life, a usage that she is uncomfortable with:

It really exposes the truth [i.e. – the way blacks use the word], kind of. But I didn't like it that he was sort of playing toward the stereotypes that a lot of males and females use when they use the word.

In another observation, she further explains this discomfort and relates how education has had an impact on her perception of the word as it is used among black artists. She also prefers to see accountability taken by those black public figures that have famously recycled the word in their art:

Now that I'm in an Af[rican]-Am[erican] class here, I really hate it. Like, I see the history behind the word, I don't like the word. Like, I don't think it should be used at all. I would almost rather hear cursing than use that, 'cause it's our own people using the word most of the time.

...We've been reading a lot of slave narratives [in the African-American class], we're starting to get the perspective of how our people were oppressed, and I start to see that it seems like we're regressing instead of progressing from where we were. And, like, I think there could be more effort put forth by our people in the music industry or the television industry to change the use of that word.

For Sophie, the repetitive use of *nigger* – not just within entertainment but outside of it – is cause for concern in that its ad nauseum-like deployment implies a growing comfort that others may have with the word. This could prove problematical for someone such as herself, considering that she does not highly regard its prevalence in just about any context:

The people who use it, I don't think they're exactly numb, I think they know what they're doing, and... I don't know why people use it that frequently, like I really, I don't know.

The following observations from Stephanie provide her take on the skit:

That's just not my type of comedy. So maybe it's just me and maybe my, like, whole thinking of what's funny. It just wasn't funny to me. I mean... a couple of parts got a little hop [i.e. – hilarity], but it wasn't that hard, holding-my-belly laughing. Alright, okay, tasteful? No. Tasteless? Yes.

She attributed her overall disapproval of the skit to the discomfort she had in seeing white persons/actors utter the word:

My whole thing, what I was thinking when I saw it was, even though these white people are actors, how do they feel? I was wondering how they felt about actually having to say that word and use it over and over again, 'cause I know, you know, like, how many times they probably had to do it. So that kind of made me, like, feel kind of weird.

Her discomfort in hearing white actors use the term within the context of “The Nigger Family” equals the discomfort she has in hearing its use by whites throughout entertainment in general. As such, she does not care for this word’s usage by whites within the latter context as well:

To me, it is kind of like a no-no for whites, period. If it’s in a film and they’re using it in the movie, 9 times out of 10, if a white person is saying “nigger,” they’re saying it to be negative.

As a word commonly utilized outside the context of entertainment, Stephanie sees a distinction between blacks using the term (possibly for purposes of “reclaiming” the word) and that of whites, and notes the existence of a linguistic double standard along racial lines:

When a white person uses it, you don’t ever know if they’re using it out of context. So they could be saying, “Yeah, I’m just playing,” but really they could be saying, like, “This nigger ain’t shit,” and that could bring up problems. I just think that it’s not happening. I mean, it is a double standard, yes, but I mean, it is what it is.

Ultimately, it does not matter to Stephanie who says it and in what context it is being said. For her, the symbolism and imagery that the word conjures is unmistakable, giving two specific reasons that could account for her disapproval of the word across the board – be it within the context of “The Nigger Family” skit, throughout entertainment, and outside of it:

It takes me back to slavery. I was raised in the South, so I’ve been called “nigger” by somebody who is of another race, and it’s not a good feeling, so it’s definitely negative to me... I don’t think it’s a good word at all.

Unquestionably, all of the participant observations of this analysis should be understood on the whole. To say it another way, caution should be heeded so as not to place an exalted status of credence on those eight participants who approved of “The Nigger

Family” as compared to only Sophie and Stephanie, just because there were many more in this analysis who liked the skit. For although the views of Sophie and Stephanie regarding “The Nigger Family” dissent from those who reacted favorably to it, their opinions about the prevalence of *nigger* both throughout and outside the entertainment realm echo the criticisms of the other skit-approving participants who did not positively interpret the word as it is prevalent in those two particular contexts. Considering this along with the fact that there are undoubtedly various other black individuals who would likewise not care for the skit/the word *nigger* in the skit (let alone care for the prevalence of the word in the other contexts), it is important that the observations of both of the skit-dissenting participants of this study be accorded as much thought and engagement as the other eight who approved of it.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the audience analysis was not to generalize the observations of ten selected individuals to represent a larger population of black persons. This analysis instead focused on the ways that these participants interpreted the word *nigger* in several contexts, and how their interpretations could shed light on how this word just might be socially constructed/reconstructed among a larger group of black individuals. The emphasis here is on how *nigger* “might” be socially constructed within those contexts, rather than declaratively assuming it to be constructed in those ways on a larger scale.

From the observations of all participants, an idea as to how black individuals can socially construct a word such as *nigger* throughout multiple contexts was discovered. This audience analysis called for the selection of 8-12 participants in order to generate insightful findings, and after the tenth participant was interviewed, there appeared to be enough information provided that would allow for such conclusions to be gathered and detailed in a final report.

For a starting point, this analysis looked at how individuals interpreted *nigger* within the context of “The Nigger Family” skit on the *Chappelle’s Show*:

- To what extent do black audience members regard the word *nigger* – as it appears within the context of the *Chappelle’s Show* – in either its traditionally pejorative sense or as a reconstructed term, apart from its commonly perceived meaning?

Out of the ten participants, eight perceived the skit as being funny overall and were able to identify in their own ways its premise of racial irony, specifically the idea that the phonetic application of *nigger* (as *Niggar*) to a white family was a subversive use of the word (for the purposes of audience entertainment). As such, it could be said that these participants perceived the skit as utilizing the “strategy of subversion through overuse” (Kennedy, 2002, p. 38) method, and that they understood the word as representing this much within the context of the skit rather than interpreting the term as a more offensive connotation, which is how the two participants not enamored with “The Niggar Family” felt.

The next research question attempted to discover how the participants viewed the word as it is prevalent throughout all of entertainment:

- To what extent do black audience members regard the word *nigger* – as it appears within various forms of popular entertainment – in either its traditionally pejorative sense or as a reconstructed term, apart from its commonly perceived meaning?

The answer to this question would not be similar to the first one, in that more participants there than not seemed to agree on a singular perception of the word in the *Chappelle’s Show* context. In the initial analysis of data for the general entertainment context, this was a bit problematic in that there had been an emphasis on trying to understand some of the participants’ observations in a manner similar to that which was discovered regarding the *Chappelle’s Show* (an obviously blatant violation of qualitative research).

However, the realization that there would be no singular perception similar to that of the *Chappelle’s Show* context – and thus perhaps no easy answer to this question – turned out to be a turning point in understanding how all participant observations were to be analyzed thereafter. People (and in the particular case of this study, the participants) have their own

ways as to how they interpret and construct symbolism, taking into account things such as one's own personal history, beliefs, and system of values. The fact that one person may favorably perceive the word's prevalence in one context (the *Chappelle's Show*) does not mean that they will favorably perceive it in another context (i.e. – general entertainment); however, there may be others who favorably view it in both contexts, or they may favorably view it within the context of a skit such as “The Nigger Family” but may express mixed emotions (i.e. – simultaneous approval and disapproval, or ambivalence) of the word as it is utilized throughout entertainment. In regards to such sentiments that reflect these differing interpretations from one context to the next among interviewees, the inclusion of their varying observations in this analysis attempted to demonstrate this much.

The last question sought to comprehend how participants view the word within the context of everyday life:

- To what extent do black audience members regard the word *nigger* – as it appears outside the world of popular entertainment (in everyday life) – in either its traditionally pejorative sense or as a reconstructed term, apart from its commonly perceived meaning?

As there were no overriding singular perceptions as to how participants view the word within the context of entertainment, there might be cause for belief that similar findings would likewise be found regarding the context of everyday life – though great care was taken by not declaratively assuming/hypothesizing this to be the case beforehand. Nonetheless, the observations of participants in this context were revealed to be similar to those regarding the word's prevalence throughout entertainment – namely, that there were divergent views regarding their perceptions of the word.

Among those participants who favorably received the *Chappelle's Show* skit, some revealed an approval for the word being used as a real-life term of endearment by blacks and non-blacks alike. However, there were also reservations expressed as to whether it is appropriate for non-blacks to make use of the word in such a manner. Additionally, observations from a few participants revealed their disapproval of the word being used as a common reference regardless of who is saying it, claiming that they make no use (or very rare use) of it at all.

Once again, similar to entertainment in general, individuals are bringing different judgments to the table in one context (the world outside of entertainment) than they are in another context (in this case, the *Chappelle's Show*), where a particular construction of the word is overwhelmingly defined and interpreted. As with the context of general entertainment, these judgments of the word outside of entertainment take into account one's own individual standards such as beliefs and values, as well as that of personal history.

The two participants who largely-to-completely disapproved of "The Nigger Family" should not be ignored in this respect. Concerning the role in this study that these particular individuals' own standards had on their perception of the word as it exists both inside and outside of an entertainment setting, these influences seemed to play a part in their construction of the word as it is prevalent on the *Chappelle's Show* skit.

Pertaining to this analysis, it appears that the concept of social constructionism is more suitably applied to those who responded favorably to "The Nigger Family," given that there were many more of these participants than those who did not approve of the skit. While it is not meant to imply that these skit-approving respondents similarly represent all other black individuals – or a majority of black individuals – who would find the skit

hilarious themselves (given the larger number of participants who approved of the skit), this study was nonetheless able to accomplish its aim of gathering analyses as to how a group of black individuals might collectively interpret – and therefore, construct – the word’s meaning in one context, even as various other personal considerations may prevent them from coming to an equally broad agreement over the word’s definition in other contexts.

Among these skit-approving participants, there was an understanding that the word *nigger* – rather than being a term regarded as insulting – was utilized for the purposes of irony and humor (or enjoyment) under the objective of comedic entertainment. In this case, the irony of the skit was that the traditionally pejorative term of *nigger* was reinterpreted as *Nigger*, and was directed at a white family that – by virtue of their skin color – are not the historical targets of the word’s emotionally injurious association. For the participants, this racial irony worked, enabling the skit to be successful in satisfying the comedic interests/curiosities (i.e. – hopes for comedic enjoyment) of its viewers. This potentially could not have been done had *nigger* taken on a meaning largely perceived as being slanderous, condescending, and belittling to themselves and their demographic.

These particular participants were able to interpret individual meanings of the word within this context that were all quite similar; thus, these individual meanings can be considered as being shared (or collective) meanings. Throughout entertainment, the word was open to different interpretations based on the type of entertainment genre that it is used in (comedy, drama, etc.), how it is used in a particular content/storyline, and who is saying it (the race of individual). Outside of entertainment, how *nigger* is used (either as an insult or as a term of endearment) as well as who it is being used by (the race of the individual) are important markers for the participants as to how the word is to be interpreted and constructed

in this context. Like the context of general entertainment, the interpretations of the word outside of entertainment varied. Ultimately applying social constructionism to the results of this study, the concept seems to more appropriately apply to how participants similarly (but all on their own) defined the word as it was utilized in “The Nigger Family” skit.

The way that these skit-approving participants viewed the word *nigger* both throughout and outside of entertainment might have some bearing on their finding the skit as being hilarious. For example, some who might possess a liberal view of the word outside the *Chappelle’s Show* realm may feel similarly about the word within the context of the skit, which could account for their approval of it (i.e. – their approval for *nigger* being utilized in the skit, their subsequent enjoyment of it). With others, the way that they view the word outside of the *Chappelle’s Show* context may have no relation on how they view the prevalence of the word within the skit. For participants who are uncomfortable with the use of the word throughout entertainment and/or in everyday life, this sentiment would especially hold true if they found the skit to be hilarious regardless.

The inability of shared interpretations to be established across all three contexts does not make the analyses any less revealing or interesting. Rather, it can be (and should be) quite insightful to comprehend the differences in how participants view the word in two particular contexts, while a majority nonetheless finds agreement on an interpretation of the word in another. As for the two individuals who did not approve of the skit, it can be reasoned that the traditional connotation of *nigger* makes it impossible for them to find appreciation for the word in any way, shape, or form. Perhaps many others who would similarly disapprove of the skit feel the same way about the word in all three contexts as did the two participants. These conclusions – which could subsequently establish a social

construction of the word across these contexts – cannot obviously be delineated from the observations of only two individuals, neither for the sake of this study nor for the sake of addressing issues outside of it. However, additional interviews with participants who may feel this way could reveal such observations, in addition to other sentiments. As such, the pursuit of more interviews that could answer these questions is encouraged.

CONCLUSION

In summation, the majority of the analysis' participants found "The Nigger Family" overall to be hilarious – in particular, noting how the racially ironic last name of the skit's white family brought the humor home for them. This is not to say that all other black viewers or even a majority of black people would agree similarly; indeed, the stances of the two skit-disapproving participants represent a dissenting viewpoint that is possibly shared by many others. Given this, it would be interesting to hear from other blacks who would likewise disapprove of the skit's premise, with an emphasis being on why they do not care for it.

More evident among participants, and potentially just as evident among many other black individuals, is the mixed feelings by which they regard the word being used outside of the *Chappelle's Show*. Real-life controversy continues to persist as to whether the word can symbolize any kind of positive connotation, no matter the context. For every time a famous and/or non-famous person tries to engage others into viewing the word as something other than an insult toward black individuals, it can just as easily take something like a well-

publicized racial outburst from Michael Richards, for example, to underscore the feelings of discomfort and pain that *nigger* has long triggered among many.

Perhaps then there are no easy answers as to whether or not the word can take on a meaning different from its historically negative one, or whether it is a word best heard only in certain contexts. The audience analysis did not attempt to answer such questions on behalf of black people worldwide. Neither was it the entire purpose of this study to change the mind of anyone on the issue, let alone make any grand societal statements regarding the never-ending controversy over the word.

There is no telling as to whether there will ever be any resolution regarding the prevalence of the word and the proper/improper use of it, no matter the context. While answers to any such questions speaking to this debate may be needed and encouraged for the benefit of making society a better place, realistically it is probably for the best that no one holds their breath in anticipation for the end of the matter anytime soon. As one participant succinctly put it, from the current looks of things regarding this issue:

“We’ll be having discussions about this until we’re all fucking dead.”

APPENDIX A: IRB CONSENT FORM

University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Adult Subjects
Social Behavioral Form

You are being asked to take part in a research study about how persons of African descent (such as yourself) feel about the use of racial slur words inside and outside of popular entertainment. For the study, you will view a small part of a comedy show in which racial slurs are used. After viewing the comedy, you will be asked a series of questions.

IRB Study #07-0189
Consent Form Version Date: 2/5/07

Title of Study: *'Nigger': Interpretations of the Word's Prevalence on the Chappelle's Show, Throughout Entertainment, and in Everyday Life*

Principal Investigator: Kyle Coward
UNC-Chapel Hill Department: Journalism and Mass Communication
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Study Contact email: kcoward@email.unc.edu

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. To join the study is voluntary. You may refuse to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge that may help other people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Deciding not to be in the study or leaving the study before it is done will not affect your relationship with the researcher, your health care provider, or the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. If you are a patient with an illness, you do not have to be in the research study in order to receive health care.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form. You should ask the researchers named above any questions you have about this study at any time.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this research study is to understand how persons of African ancestry feel about the presence of racial slur words in popular entertainment. Such slur words are found in many forms of popular entertainment, such as television, movies, and music.

Some of this entertainment is created by African-American artists, and are enjoyed by black audiences. There are some blacks who believe that this kind of entertainment disrespects the black community, but there are also some who disagree with this belief. This study aims to find out how black audiences feel about the use of a certain racial slur word in a television comedy segment, as well as how they feel about the use of such a word in various forms of popular entertainment and in everyday life.

How many people will take part in this study?

If you decide to be in this study, you will be one of approximately 8-12 people in this research study.

How long will your part in this study last?

It is estimated that anywhere between a half-hour and 1 ½ hours of your time will be needed to complete the study.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

You will view a segment of a sketch comedy television show that lasts approximately 3 ½ -4 minutes. This segment contains the use of racial slur words, and following the completion of the segment, you will be asked a series of questions in regards to the study's purpose.

What are the possible benefits from being in this study?

Research is designed to benefit society by gaining new knowledge. By participating in this study, you are potentially contributing to an ongoing debate among researchers, scholars, and citizens regarding racial slur words.

What are the possible risks or discomforts involved with being in this study?

The only potential risk to participating in the study is the discomfort you may feel in hearing racial slur words. This risk appears to be a minimal one, and there are no apparent physical risks that result from participating in this study.

How will your privacy be protected?

No subjects will be identified in any report or publication about this study. Although every effort will be made to keep research records private, there may be times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of such records, including personal information. This is very unlikely, but if disclosure is ever required, UNC-Chapel Hill will take steps allowable by law to protect the privacy of personal information. In some cases, your information in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University, research sponsors, or government agencies for purposes such as quality control or safety.

The interview will be recorded and transcribed. Both the audio recordings and the transcriptions of interviews will be maintained after the completion of the project, in the event that this project

is expanded in the future. However, your identity will remain anonymous on all recordings and transcriptions.

Additionally, all audio recordings will be handled and stored by the principal investigator of the study only, before they are submitted to a transcription service. Your identity will remain anonymous during this period as well, and all hard-copy versions of the final transcriptions will be handled by the principal investigator only. Your real name will not be marked on the audio recordings, nor will it be used in any of this project's findings that are published.

What if you want to stop before your part in the study is complete?

At any time while watching the video segment, and at any time during the interview, you can withdraw from this study at any time, without penalty.

Will you receive anything for being in this study?

For the generosity of your time, the principal investigator will provide accommodations for food and beverages shortly before, during, or after the interview. Additionally, the principal investigator will make arrangements to reimburse any parking or transportation costs.

Will it cost you anything to be in this study?

There will be no costs for being in this study.

What if you are a UNC student?

You may choose not to be in the study or to stop being in the study before it is over at any time. This will not affect your class standing or grades at UNC-Chapel Hill. You will not be offered or receive any special consideration if you take part in this research.

What if you are a UNC employee?

Taking part in this research is not a part of your University duties, and refusing will not affect your job. You will not be offered or receive any special job-related consideration if you take part in this research.

What if you have questions about this study?

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, or if a research-related injury occurs, you should contact the researchers listed on the first page of this form.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research subject?

All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB_subjects@unc.edu.

Participant's Agreement:

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Signature of Research Subject

Date

Printed Name of Research Subject

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Describe how you felt about what you just saw/Describe how you feel about the word *nigger* (or, the *n-word*) being used in this comedy skit.
 - If the subject was offended by the use of the word, ask why they felt offended.
 - If the subject was not offended by the use of the word, ask why they did not feel offended.
 - If the subject was ambivalent about the use of the word, ask why they felt ambivalent.
2. Tell me what types of popular entertainment you enjoy (i.e. – music, films, television, etc.).
3. Does any of the entertainment that you enjoy have people/artists that use the word *nigger* (or, the *n-word*) in it?
 - If the answer is yes, ask subjects about the kinds of entertainment that they enjoy.
4. How do you feel about the word *nigger* being used in entertainment? How do you particularly feel about the word *nigger* being used by black persons in entertainment? (These may not need to be asked if the subject answered these questions in #3.)
 - If the subject approves of the word being used, ask why they feel this way.
 - If the subject disapproves of the word being used, ask why they feel this way.
 - If the subject expresses ambivalence about the word being used, ask why they feel this way.
5. How do you feel about the word *nigger* (or, the *n-word*) being used in everyday life, outside of entertainment? How do you particularly feel about the word *nigger* being used by black persons in everyday life, outside of entertainment? (These may not need to be asked if the subject answered these questions in #3.)
 - If the subject approves of the word being used, ask why they feel this way.
 - If the subject disapproves of the word being used, ask why they feel this way.
 - If the subject expresses ambivalence about the word being used, ask why they feel this way.
6. Finally, explain what the word *nigger* (or, the *n-word*) represents for you. (This question may not need to be asked if such an answer to it was provided within the previous answers).

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